

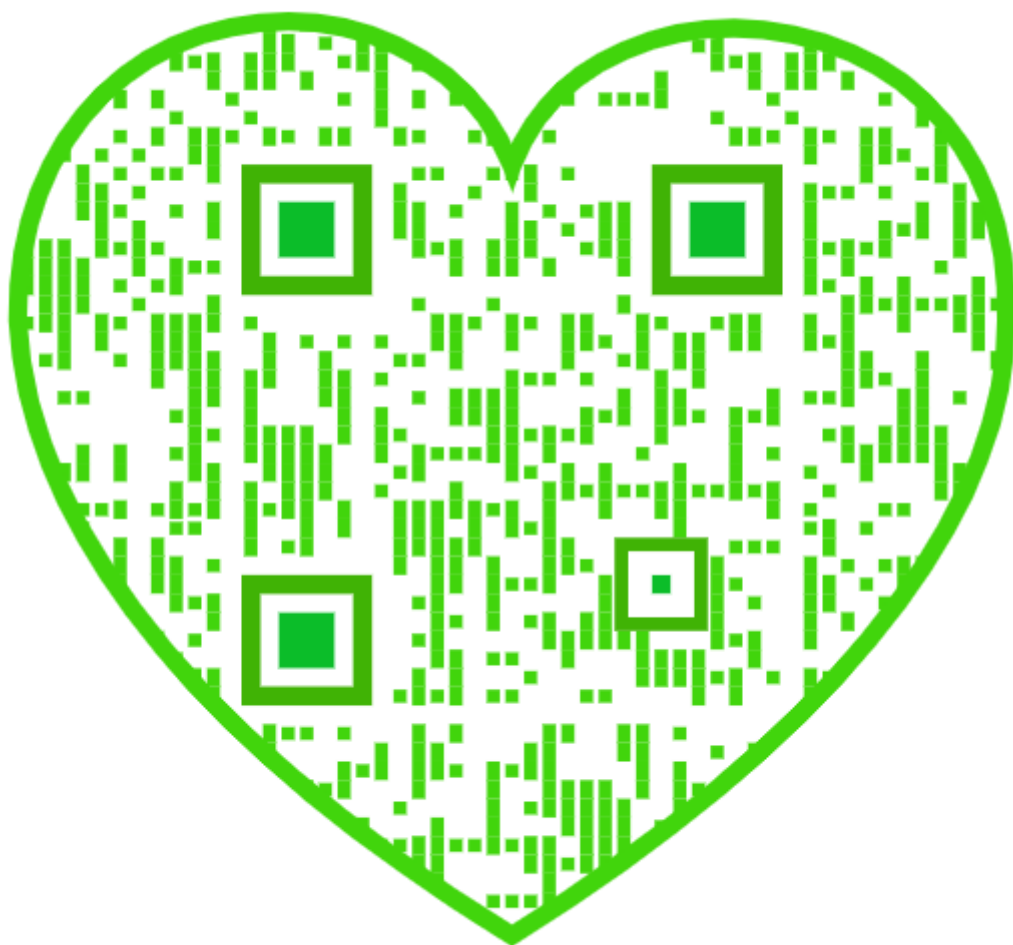
IZUSHIRO
ILLUST RURIA MIYUKI

RETIRER PLAN

THE GREATEST MAGICMASTER'S

16





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RETIREMENT PLAN

16







The Greatest Magicmaster's Retirement Plan

C O N T E N T S

16

Eighty-Eighth Chapter The Fierce

Search-and-Destroy Operation

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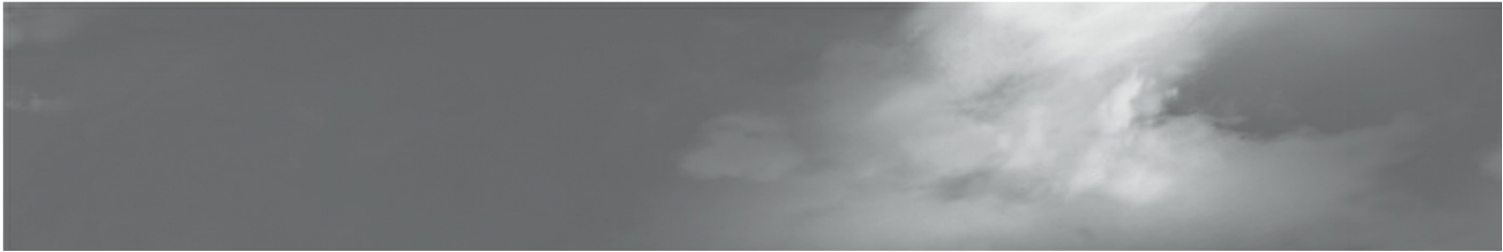
Ninetieth Chapter Divine Wisdom and Grimoire

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Eighty-Eighth Chapter

The Fierce Search-and-Destroy Operation

Within a certain area of the human domain, a group ran at full speed from shadow to shadow within what little natural forest remained. The sunlight filtering down from the artificial sun pushed away those shadows, stretching from the trees.

All of the trees here seemed miniature compared with the trees of the Outer World. They were once supposed to be a normal size, but in this distorted world, they were now the standard.

Those running through the forest were Fanon and her subordinates. They had two targets—a pair who had abetted violent criminals in their escape from the Trojan Prison as well as inflicted serious damage on the citizens of Clevideet.

The pursued pair included Gordon, the former warden of the Trojan Prison, and his former vice-warden, Suzar. Gordon had been a Double Digit Magicmaster of Clevideet and candidate for the position of Single.

Their elimination was a priority for Clevideet.

Naturally, Fanon, who they had humiliated, had volunteered to hunt them down. She was more than willing to go on a rampage and use the full extent of her abilities. After all, she was the “Hardest Magicmaster,” known for her selfishness and sternness.

However, before the incident, Gordon and Suzar had stolen the latest AWRs from the secret military area Area 90. So Fanon’s real mission was to reclaim the third arm, Barbaros, as well as the newest gun-type AWR, Caligula.

In reality, Fanon had little experience with this type of mission, and if anything, she was bad at them. So in effect, it was her second-in-command, Exceles, who would be in charge of the mission and, as such, carried the heaviest responsibility.

Exceles ran without a trace of exhaustion despite the luggage currently hanging from each shoulder. On one was a cylinder containing the parts for the AWR Three Precept Contradiction, and the other carried a cylindrical case containing an umbrella with a lovely design.

Both were Fanon's favorites.

Despite appearances, Exceles was anything but calm of mind.

Sheesh, this was supposed to be a secret mission, she thought, but Sir Alus has already seen through almost all of it. I can only hope the top brass will understand that I did what I could...

Even with these thoughts, Exceles moved like the wind.

Eventually the group weaved its way through the dense forest of Alpha and out into the bright light.

At the very least, we have to be the ones to eliminate Gordon and Suzar...
Exceles thought.

Exceles knew that by now Alpha should be carrying out a major roundup of the escaped criminals. Regardless of the outcome, it shouldn't be long before it was all over. Now that Alus Reigin, ranked even higher than Fanon, was on the move to get rid of the escaped criminals, Exceles wanted to at least finish one of their missions.

After all, if Alpha intervened even more, they might get in the way of this mission's success. That said, since Alus had most likely seen through their mission being only to recover their AWRs, there was no time to casually consult with Clevideet on how to proceed. It was now a battle of speed.

Seeing Exceles's face cloud over, another female member behind her frowned and spoke up.

"Aren't we too obedient to Ms. Felinella? Sure, it was a dangerous situation that could have increased tensions between our nations back there...but aren't we the ones who should be thanked?"

The Magicmaster who was half complaining and half asking was one of Fanon's loyal subordinates. Her name was Lurier, and she was no less free-

spirited than Fanon.

She had taken a hit from Loki Leevehl when they had encountered Alpha's rank 1, Alus Reigin. Loki's overly sharp kick had struck her in the arm, but the wound had already fully healed. However, she couldn't keep herself from moving her arm from time to time to confirm her sensation.

Fanon, who was running in the front of their formation, didn't bother answering and instead gave Exceles an exasperated look.

So Exceles said, "Don't say that. Alpha's Second Magical Institute came under attack, and Lady Fanon can't well show off the full power of her Three Precept Contradiction."

"But...Ms. Felinella is just a student, isn't she? We should be fine, right?" asked Lurier.

"We're talking about Lord Socalent's daughter. That's not going to fly. We will give Felinella Socalent nothing to use against us. If we were to show her a national secret like the Three Precept Contradiction, we would need to gain something of equal value. Otherwise it won't be worth it, and I doubt we would hear the end of it from the top brass," said Exceles.

The Three Precept Contradiction consisted of three parts, but only one of them was top secret, while the secrecy of the other two was one step lower. But Clevideet and Alpha weren't close enough to reveal secrets for free.

Unusually, there were currently male Magicmasters in Fanon's group with them. They were all dead silent, as they had no say. Or more accurately, they restrained themselves from saying anything unnecessary.

But Exceles could sense that they were not satisfied with the situation either. It wasn't hard to understand how they felt, having just come back from the Outer World and then being dragged into this troublesome mission.

As if representing their inner thoughts, Lurier asked again, "But for example, what would be something of equal value?"

With Exceles around, the others could be truly carefree. They had clearly paid no attention to political affairs since they didn't have to deal with foreign negotiations. But as someone in charge of them, Exceles felt a need to educate

them.

“Well, that would be secrets regarding their own Magicmasters,” the Spotter said. “Alpha’s Lettie Kultunca obviously has a lower rank than Lady Fanon. So it would need to pertain to Alus Reigin...more specifically his weaknesses or habits, I suppose. Anything that would give us an ace card to use against him would be most welcome.”

Exceles paused and looked at Fanon. She probably felt the same way. They had caught a glimpse of the power wielded by the Magicmaster who stood at their peak, but there had been no end in sight to the depths of it. His mysterious magical properties were particularly interesting to Exceles, both as a Spotter and as a Magicmaster who fought on the front lines.

Even without favoritism, it was clear that the Singles above rank 4 were all unimaginable monsters.

“If we, at the very least, had information on what attribute he specializes in or his AWR...” Exceles stopped there. Or rather, she let out a sigh.

Frankly, he wouldn’t let them get such information easily. And unless he let them have the information, it was pointless to even hold any hope. Exceles could read people, and she had come to that understanding after their short discussion.

The boy was sharp and had unfathomable insight...and then there was the situation they were in. No matter what they tried, the scales were heavily tipped in the other side’s favor.

Seeing how meek Exceles was, Lurier nonchalantly spoke.

“In short, petty tricks are pointless. But from what I saw he was just some big-headed brat. I’m sure someone as beautiful as you are has other means at your disposal. Maybe you could get something if you stripped off your clothes and showed each other your private parts and genitals under the cover of night? You have nothing to lose so it would be all profits!” Lurier smugly exclaimed like she’d just proposed a brilliant idea.

Exceles couldn’t help but be stunned. “Can you not talk about matters of national importance using your virtueless sensibilities? In fact, who do you think

you are, selling off your second-in-command so casually...?”

“Oh, come on, it was just a simple suggestion. Well, it is a matter of national interest... Also, I was thinking that maybe Lady Fanon is more his type.” Lurier smiled innocently as if she was brilliant.

Exceles failed to hide the surprised expression that crossed her face.

Some of the male Magicmasters found themselves frowning at Lurier’s overly frank manner of speaking and looked away.

“Are you really the type to say that kind of thing?” Exceles asked.

“Oh, well, you see, I wanted to say something clever... When I overheard you and Lady Fanon negotiate, I found myself strangely inspired,” Lurier explained.

“Just whose influence is this, I wonder. I don’t care what you say,” said Exceles, “but please try to show some class outside of the squad. We wouldn’t want to be blamed for something you say... Isn’t that right, Lady Fanon?”

But contrary to expectations, Fanon didn’t react immediately. Instead, she waited a beat, then glared at Lurier over her shoulder. “Private parts and genitals... Should I consider those your last words?”

Her tone was harsh, but it was hard to tell from her expression if she was angry or embarrassed. She was probably angry, though...all the while hiding her maidenly embarrassment at having imagined the scene.

“It’s just a figure of speech, Lady Fanon. You know, like a ‘honey trap.’ It’s an old strategy...” Exceles made excuses while Lurier apologized and skillfully lowered her head while sprinting.

Fanon herself lacked experience and imagination and had little knowledge of matters between men and women. Incidentally, Fanon’s sexual knowledge was only at a child’s level because Exceles and some members of the unit had been sure to give her an ultra-pure education. Her subsequent hatred of men had been a miscalculation.

Exceles cleared her throat to attempt to ease the strange atmosphere before continuing. “That said, our opponent is a problem. Lord Socalent’s experience will only work against us in an information battle.”

At best, they could show their earnest sincerity. As one could expect from someone with a background in the intelligence field, he was a cut above when it came to trickery. In fact, their conversation with Vizaist had left them more mentally drained than anything else that had happened recently.

Exceles sighed and her shoulders slumped. She never wanted to be seated at the negotiating table again, having to try to hide their circumstances and weaknesses.

“Well, let’s get back on topic,” said Exceles. “I told Ms. Felinella about the attack on the Institute because we both served to profit from it. As a result, she ended up returning to the Institute faster than she had planned.”

“Aye.” The squad members nodded, coming to the conclusion that it was all a matter of perspective.

Fanon, at the front of the formation, suddenly raised her hand to signal the rest of the squad.

“I’ve found it!” she said. “If you want to idly gossip, save it for after we’ve cleaned those two up. Exceles, ensure that our formation and coordination isn’t disrupted. Not that there’s any idiot who would stray from my barriers. As for your suggestion, you’ve finished the preparations for that, haven’t you?”

“Of course, the preparations are perfect.”

“As for the aftermath, after using that, tell the people back home that they’ll regret it if they screw up the information concealment,” said Fanon.

“Excuse me, Lady Fanon. I’ve made sure to threaten them with a three-day solo exercise in the Outer World if they get directly involved,” said Exceles.

Fanon’s subordinates shuddered hearing that. One of them even noted that they would obviously die from that.

“That’s what it takes. Otherwise the men back home won’t put in the necessary work,” Exceles said as if she had a screw loose.

To some, that was just how important the mission was.

“You’re a second-in-command that I can rely on,” said Fanon.

With Fanon herself paying compliments to that insane statement, they were

once again reminded of the kind of conditions their squad operated under. It might sound strange, but as fellow countrymen, they couldn't help but feel gratitude toward their fellow comrades in arms who would be in charge of cleaning up the aftermath.

Incidentally, Fanon was exceptionally soft on female squad members, so even on the battlefield, the male Magicmasters ended up taking ninety percent of any blame.

While they were stuck in such an unreasonable squad and put through hell, the male Magicmasters were naturally trained to become the best of the best, so maybe it was for the best after all.

"They'll notice us soon. Exceles, let's get started," said Fanon.

"Okay!"

They were currently right on the border of Alpha and Clevideet. Fanon's squad had been running down the border in the direction of the Outer World.

"The closest village or city is at least thirty kilometers away, Lady Fanon," said Exceles.

"I know that."

Exceles read Fanon's intentions and gave instructions to the squad as they vigilantly pursued their targets Gordon and Suzar. They adjusted their speed to each other and kept a certain distance from each other... It was thanks to Exceles that they could maintain such a precise distance.

Fanon nodded at the report coming from one of the men and swiftly swung a hand down.

"Lady Fanon, please don't provoke Alpha too much by being too flashy within the country! Enemy coming from the front!" Exceles shouted.

Immediately afterward, a chilling grazing sound rang out as something flew directly in front of them at high speed—a magic bullet, fired by Suzar from the stolen AWR Caligula.

Fanon quickly stepped forward and used her AWR to swat it away. With sparks of magical light, the magic bullet changed direction and then burrowed

into the trunk of a nearby tree.

Fanon's AWR was no longer made with a frilly and cute cloth. Now eight thin magic plates created an umbrella.

A bright light emitted from the magical plates and eight diamond-shaped plates broke away to spread out through the area. The umbrella that had been protecting Fanon now floated around, forming a circle around her.

This was one part of the Three Precept Contradiction: Aegis System.

"Don't think the same attack will work twice against the world's Hardest Magicmaster!" Fanon proclaimed, staring fearlessly into the trees far away.

She held up her AWR, which was supporting her enormous mana output. Her powerful AWR was no longer just the shaft of an umbrella, but a commander for eight royal guards. The mana emanating from it spread behind her like a feather with a long tail.

With this it doesn't matter where the attacker is hiding. When faced with the Aegis System, they will flee in fear as any means of attack will fail, thought Exceles.

With a single glance, Exceles could tell that Fanon had changed modes. No magic would work against the AWR. Because it focused on nothing but defense, the Aegis System was unparalleled at protecting against physical attacks and magic.

Therefore, it was only obvious it could repel a magic bullet. While she was convinced of that, Exceles still found herself amazed at the power of the AWR.

The AWR's main body was the eight plates, all engraved with magic formulas. When detached from the shaft they could move autonomously and flexibly adapt a formation.

That said, the biggest strength of this system is not its defensive power. Rather it is its excellent information accumulation ability thanks to its advanced automatic program... thought Exceles.

The plates were not just excellent shields. They were also the pinnacle of information analysis. They were equipped with a special formula that allowed

them to automatically analyze the current battle situation and coordinate with each other to optimally deploy barriers. On top of that, they instantly analyzed any magic that touched them, and they could even reveal the process of its formula composition.

Combined with Fanon's abilities to read the battle, they could react to any attack without delay and create a variety of barriers to give her an absolute advantage.

As long as she had that system, Fanon would always stand at the top of Single Digit Magicmasters when it came to defense. Even as Exceles was thinking about that, several more gunshots came from the direction they were advancing to.

Tearing through the air, the magic bullets headed straight for Fanon. It seemed these bullets were loaded with a different formula from the first one. They exploded midair before reaching the barrier, creating a barrage of fragments to stall Fanon and the others.

It was next to impossible to see...but not a single member of the squad adopted defensive measures. Instead they advanced at the same speed.

More magic bullets came flying, and the Aegis System detected and reacted to them. The eight plates slid forward and deployed the same duplicate barrier, creating a giant dome-shaped shield without any gaps.

But these magic bullets were made to explode before touching the barrier. They split into several small fragments and deployed some sort of small mana reflector between them. It was a hail of bullets using ricochets to try to circumvent the divine shield and make their way inside.

At first it was just a few bullets, but now a swarm of thousands attacked Fanon and her squad. The explosive bullet was called Biamma.

In theory, these bullets set up multiple reflectors around the target to contain it within the area of destruction. Through numerous ricochets and small explosions, a hail of bullets overran the area from all directions.

However, after a single look at it, Exceles understood the spell's structure.

It is certainly powerful. Caligula's magic bullet-loading system works so well

with magic, thought Exceles.

No individual bullet had that much mana within it, but they were well thought-out and well conceived. In particular, it was difficult for normal magic to replicate their capability to handle multiple spells between setting up the reflectors and the exploding bullets. That's why the synergy of the magic formula engraved on the AWR's barrel and the bullet was Caligula's true value.

But even then—

Fanon's squad was perfectly fine under the protection of the Aegis System. When combined with Fanon's brain, it was a true marvel.

Seeing the complicated behavior of the magic bullets, Fanon agitatedly swung the shaft of the umbrella, causing the deployed barriers to expand. The fragments and reflectors were caught up in the expansion and blown away.

Fanon coldly glanced at it like it was a petty trick. "We still have some leeway. Exceles, hurry them along."

"Understood."

Exceles immediately nodded and looked over at Lurier with some apprehension. The girl's words and actions sometimes left Exceles uneasy, but she was one of the squad's most-skilled members.

«*Lander the Box*»

In the next moment, the white barrier Fanon had created appeared far ahead of them. It was a rectangular box with fifty-meter-long sides. But it was just an inorganic floating cube with no entrance or exit.

Then, the umbrella shaft in Fanon's hand started heating up from the magic formula and the box fell with the force of a meteorite.

"I will do my best to match you, Lady Fanon!" said Lurier as she readied her mana with great enthusiasm. Beads of sweat appeared on her forehead and the edges of her lips twisted upward.

"Burn down!"

«*Flame Cradle*»

After she finished constructing her spell, flames wrapped around Lurier's arms. She didn't mind the tail of fire licking her cheek, though, and brought her palms together. As she did, the flames disappeared and instead a large fire erupted from within Fanon's spell far in the distance.

Normally, spells would fiercely clash and only combine if the casters and attribute had good compatibility and both casters were very precise with their magic. But unlike ordinary magic, Fanon's barriers didn't have an attribute, so it was not subject to interference by other spells.

The flames surrounded the white box and turned into a roaring fire, but ultimately the massive heat dissipated until it was just a small fire at the bottom of the box that was eventually snuffed out. However, the trees that had been seared by the heat now sent smoke and steam into the air.

The distant fire would serve as a smoke screen... It would stall the target without interfering with Fanon's own spell.

"Haaah... That really used up a lot of mana," Lurier said, her shoulders slumping and her speed dropping.

"Well done. Our chances of catching our target will be greatly improved now...although I suppose you could say that you've managed to bring out Lady Fanon's sadistic side. So you should reflect on your actions," Exceles said with a wink, to which Lurier could only reply with an "Okaaay" and a dry smile.

Exceles studied their opponent from afar with her detection and glanced at Fanon. "It was a success, Lady Fanon. They have been stopped."

Fanon nodded in satisfaction.

"Try not to be crushed so easily!" Fanon barked happily, increasing her speed even more and feeling like a hunter who'd driven her prey into a trap.

A huge mass was slowly descending on Gordon and Suzar. But it was covered in white smoke. By the time they noticed, it ought to be too late for them to escape and they would end up being crushed.

Incidentally, it was exceptionally solid. Lander the Box was composed of a single magic formula engraved on the umbrella's shaft. No adjustments could be made to it, but that made the resulting barrier much sturdier. Aside from the

Three Precept Contradiction, there weren't many barriers that could exceed it in strength.

Next, Fanon swung the shaft down with a snap, and with a tremor, the giant mass rapidly fell.

A dozen seconds later...a cloud of dirt and smoke still lingered in the air.

"Hello, you two sewer rats. How does it feel to be crushed?" Suppressing her racing heart, Fanon triumphantly announced in a voice one octave higher than usual.

She thought her spell might have been too hearty for an hors d'oeuvre, but...

As the wind blew, the two targets appeared from the smoke. Both gave Fanon a detestable look. They had just barely dodged the spell.

Gordon must have used his AWR to secure their escape. Barbaros was a frightening tool. Its massive palm had held up the cube to allow Suzar to escape before he pushed it back enough to jump away himself.

But they weren't completely unscathed. Gordon fell to one knee, a portion of his face burned by the heat. Suzar was crouching down and holding his military cap to keep it on his head.

Having escaped first, Suzar had focused his fire on a corner of the falling cube to tilt it. By doing that, he'd created a small gap to help the larger man.

As a result, they had retreated slightly from their original position...just as Fanon had planned. By the time they spotted the hidden Lander the Box, their path of retreat was restricted. They couldn't escape to the sides or straight ahead, so they had no choice but to jump backward.

Fanon had adjusted the falling speed and angle to force them into making the rational move one might expect from former military personnel.

There were no private residences or bases around them now. It was a truly favorable location. With that, the first stage of Fanon's preparations was complete.

"I was planning on killing you if we met again," Gordon brazenly spat out as he slowly stood up. "But to think you'd come to get killed of your own accord, it

must have been very humiliating for you.”

With a creaking sound, he opened and closed the fist on Barbaros, the AWR integrated with his spine. It hadn't been long since he first put the AWR on, but he handled it exceptionally well.

Fanon was unfazed by the taunt, maintaining an eerily calm smile.

“Humiliating? Ah, I suppose it might have been. But from now on it's a simple pest extermination. There's nothing I'd rather crush than a bug scurrying in front of me.”

Suzar let out a snicker at that. His cold eyes looked as if he pitied a child putting on a brave front.

“So a Magicmaster who hit the bottom is coming back with friends in tow for revenge? It seems you've forgotten to appreciate the life you were given.”

As he said this, Suzar's hand moved at lightning speed and he fired a magic bullet from Caligula so fast it was hard to tell when he had shot it.

The shot was focused on utmost speed and precision to pierce its target without them even realizing. It was a compressed air bullet, an Invisible Bullet.

There wasn't even the sound of gunfire, just the sound of whipping wind.

Faced with that invisible threat, Fanon simply took a step forward. Though she made no noticeable movement of the umbrella, a translucent barrier deployed in front of her and blocked the attack.

She took one more step and another, continuing to walk as if to say nobody could halt her advance.

The squad members chose to stay behind. They had been strictly ordered not to intervene so that the captain could get her revenge personally.

“Oh, that stick... So you had your own AWR too. You were nothing but a letdown last time. But I assumed you would lock yourself in your room to cry, so why are you showing your face now?” There was still plenty of confidence in Gordon's deep voice along with the ridicule. “I don't particularly enjoy bullying the weak...but I suppose I will kill you. But in consideration of your foolhardiness, I'll snuff you out quickly.”

Fanon showed no anger at his words. She just continued to walk...until she finally stopped.

“Bring it, small fry.”

Fanon beckoned Gordon over with her index finger, and he seemed to disappear.

Barbaros’s massive muscles scratched the ground, giving Gordon a burst of speed, which was further increased by him kicking off the ground. He pressed in on Fanon in the blink of an eye.

Midair, Barbaros’s black wrist began to bend, gathering power like a drawn bowstring. At the same time, the magic stone in the center of its massive palm clad its claws in a bluish-purple light.

«*Vercival*»

Massive mana gathered in the black iron claws, and Barbaros transformed it into a different aspect of power.

The eight shields of the Aegis System formed in front of Fanon, creating a series of barriers to protect their master. When Barbaros’s claws touched the barrier, the mana spread into it like an electric discharge.

It was a mighty blow.

However, Fanon didn’t bat an eye despite Gordon being right in front of her. At some point, she had stabbed the umbrella shaft into the ground. Trusting in her absolute defense, she took it all in stride and looked for opportunities to counterattack.

“Ugh?!” Gordon’s expression finally showed a tinge of panic as the result he’d expected didn’t pan out. He’d been confident a single blow from Barbaros could destroy any barrier, physical or magical. The magic stone in its palm, once activated and glowing, was supposed to crush magic itself regardless of how it was formed. It was supposed to be an unstoppable spear...nothing was supposed to be able to block it.

After all, it was a miraculous AWR, the product of Clevideet’s knowledge. It had been sealed away for a long time because they hadn’t been able to find a

user, but Gordon hadn't only been a candidate for the position of Single but also a candidate to become its user.

It had been impossible for man to use because of the strain it put on the user's body, but Gordon alone, with his strong body, was the exception. To overcome that, he'd taken the extreme measure of implanting the base of the AWR directly into his body. A tool beyond human knowledge could only be handled by a Magicmaster beyond human knowledge.

But now Barbaros was making strange noises, not as the result of two equal powers clashing. Instead it sounded like the monstrous AWR was letting out some sort of scream. Then the giant arm was repelled, and the pressure of the barrier blew Gordon's large frame sideways.

He immediately used Barbaros to grab the ground and stop himself, but not before a considerable distance between him and Fanon had opened. He stood up and shouted with a quiver in his throat, "Impossible! Barbaros was made to be an unstoppable spear!"

Gordon poured enough strength into his sturdy body that blood vessels showed, then unleashed a storm of mana. Exceles, who was calmly watching the scene from behind Fanon, analyzed the information with a thoughtful expression.

Gordon's remark: an unstoppable spear. That was probably the truth. In the past, Clevideet had focused its efforts on creating a peerless AWR using meteor metal. Exceles had heard rumors of the nation starting a project to produce an unstoppable spear and an unbreakable shield.

Even someone as well informed as Exceles hadn't heard that the project had been successful, but surely Fanon's Aegis System was a product of that research, which meant that a spear must exist as well. And Exceles was now convinced that Barbaros was what Clevideet had imagined as their unstoppable spear.

Which means...

Exceles furrowed her brow and began to think. Immediately, a bluish-black bruise stretched from her throat to chin. This greatly expanded her senses as a Spotter, allowing her to analyze and understand targets with unparalleled

precision. It was a power unique to her, and she had no choice but to use that trump card to perceive a realm of magic that normal Magicmasters couldn't recognize.

The project to create a pair of the strongest AWRs, an unstoppable spear and an unbreakable shield, the Paradox Project, must have finished Fanon's shield first. As for the spear, it was unclear when it had been made, but based on the pre-mission details sent by the top brass as well as what Exceles's detection was picking up on Barbaros...

The spear, Barbaros, was probably created later. Which means...!

When she realized that, a chill ran down Exceles's spine. During development, experiments must have used detailed data from each other, which meant that the order of their creation was the key to everything.

If the shield had been completed first and they had used the data from it to finish creating the spear...Barbaros might be able to break through the Aegis System.

In that case, it might have a mechanism to destroy the barrier!

Exceles dashed to get in front of Fanon. The rest of the squad sensed something as well and started moving to protect Fanon.

"Exceles and the rest of you, you don't have to do anything," said Fanon. And with a whoosh, she swung the umbrella shaft sideways and stopped her squad.

"But Barbaros might have been made specifically to pierce through the Aegis System! It must have some sort of trick!" said Exceles.

"Well, I will accept that possibility," Fanon casually replied, leaving Exceles aghast.

"Y-You realized?"

"It's the kind of thing you could expect from the top, or rather, the kind of people who prioritize crisis management," said Fanon. "And considering our ruler's personality, they would keep a guarantee in store. If the Three Precept Contradiction was the nation's only trump card, it wouldn't make sense for that old bastard to relinquish it to me so easily. I'm the only one who can use the

Three Precept Contradiction, so it's easy to imagine that he would hide a means to break the shield, just in case. That old bastard doesn't fully trust anyone."

"But to think that he would conceal an AWR with so much power... Fusing the base of an AWR into the body like that is forbidden by international law. And I bet it's too insane of a thing for anyone but that lump muscle to handle anyways. Pfft, well, just watch. Our ruler will ultimately have failed to do anything of national importance."

Fanon gave Exceles an amused smile before turning back to Gordon with a surly look. To the onlookers she looked like a reliable captain.

"I understand. Then we will watch your fight until the end, Lady Fanon." Exceles bowed and stepped back.

She was ready to protect Fanon at any cost if something were to happen, but now she felt that her fear had been groundless. That said, she was still the squad's second-in-command. Unlike the other squad members, her pride wouldn't allow her to sit by and do nothing.

The bruise once again spread to Exceles's right cheek. It covered half her beautiful face, excluding only her right eye.

Fanon glanced over her shoulder with a worried gaze, but Exceles wouldn't relent on this. Analyzing and conveying useful information was the reason she was here. As she tried to focus, a magic bullet trailing a tail of mana light cut through the air and approached.

Suzar wasn't about to miss an opening. But he hadn't aimed at Fanon or Exceles; he'd aimed at another squad member, who also easily blocked it. However, this time a violent impact roared when the bullet struck the barrier. While the force of destruction didn't make its way into the barrier, the vibrations shook the air and made the squad members instinctively cover their ears.

"An amplification of the impact. That must be the antiphysical barrier bullet Soldora! Lady Fanon, cover your ears!" said Exceles.

Exceles avoided the danger by focusing her mana to her ears. She shouted to Fanon and received a fearless reply.

“Barrier manipulation is my specialty. Blocking the sound from reaching my ears is simple, don’t worry. Still, what an annoying interruption.”

A short distance away, right before firing his next bullet, Suzar clicked his tongue and stopped, looking up at the sky.

A huge shadow suddenly covered his face. A giant cube, created by Fanon with a wave of her hand, was rapidly closing in. Even as it fell, it continued to expand, increasing in mass. As the shadow grew darker, Suzar leaped to the side to retreat out of range of the attack.

The cube crashed into the ground, causing a tremor and kicking up more dirt. Having managed to get out of the way in the nick of time, Suzar was gasping for breath as he stood up.

Realizing he wouldn’t be able to dodge in time if he continued as he’d been doing, he used the explosive bullet, Biamma, to further propel himself away—it only cost the burned edges of his clothes.

While the move injured him, his quick-wittedness showed he should not be taken lightly. His gun-type AWR, Caligula, and its magic bullets were designed specifically for combat against Magicmasters.

Naturally, as a Spotter, Exceles would be no match for him. If she used distraction tactics, she’d have a bigger chance of winning against Gordon than Suzar. The only one who might be able to fight him one-on-one aside from Fanon was Lurier.

Exceles stared vigilantly at Suzar, who only gave her a doubtful glance in return.

“Handling Biamma so well, as well as understanding the effect of Soldora. How the hell did you and Fanon Trooper know?” he asked.

“Did you forget where you stole that from? We have all the prior data on the magic Caligula can fire,” Exceles said.

“I see. Naturally you would,” the villain responded. “But it seems you are a little too conceited. Knowledge you’ve gotten from reading documents and from seeing it for yourself are two completely different things. In the Trojan Prison, a guard who only judges prisoners by their outward appearance won’t

live long.”

Fanon laughed mockingly at Suzar’s haughty attitude. “It doesn’t matter if I knew ahead of time or not. No matter how many little tricks you have, a weakling is a weakling. You underestimate Singles too much, former vice-warden. It seems being a prison guard is an easy job where all you have to do is bark all the time.”

Fanon redeployed her barrier. Yet another white cube fell toward the men: Gordon, who’d finally managed to get back up, and Suzar, who was vigilantly wielding his gun.

Exceles looked around with a furrowed brow. She’d have preferred to avoid duking it out within Alpha’s borders, especially seeing the aftermath of the attacks. The ground was deformed, the forest’s trees snapped in half, with smoke coming from some of them.

Exceles could only pray that there wouldn’t be any more damage. She hoped this would end the battle as she watched over her captain’s battle with the rest of the squad. Her face showed melancholy for some time.

As for the three facing off on the battlefield...

While the cube fell toward Gordon and Suzar, Fanon immediately set up for her next move. She raised one of her hands and Aegis moved in response. Three of its plates deployed to the left and generated a barrier using a different formula.

Gordon’s huge armor, which was intercepting them, moved eerily. Stretching out a giant finger, its tip transformed into a shape reminiscent of the tip of a spear.

As expected of a spear, he was planning to break through a single point.

The tip of the finger had just changed shape, but it seemed oddly fitting.

It seemed to be the embodiment of Barbaros’s true power.

Seeing that transformation, Exceles analyzed what Gordon was after and shouted out, “That spear shape... If it penetrates, it will cancel the spell entirely! Lady Fanon!”

Hearing her panicked voice, Gordon fearlessly bellowed, “You’re too late! This is where the true fun begins. Now, show me the power of a Single!!!”

The overly dense mana twisted space, making the air shimmer like a heat haze. All Magicmasters present got goose bumps, and their hair stood on end.

Gordon had once been a candidate for the Single position, and his power hadn’t declined in the slightest. He still had the strength to be worthy of the position. At the very least, his amount of mana rivaled any first-rate Magicmaster.

But while Fanon heard Exceles’s warning, she didn’t take any special measures.

Barbaros, now with all of its fingers turned into clawlike spears, clashed with Aegis. Just after Fanon had set up her defense with three of the plates, an air-ripping sound came from Gordon’s side.

Suzar had fired an Invisible Bullet through the slight gap in the Aegis, and it was flying toward Fanon’s face.

Fanon used her umbrella shaft to block the Invisible Bullet.

Kuh! What force! Fanon thought.

The force blew back Fanon’s guard and arm. At the same time, the compressed air burst, numbing her right hand.

Gordon mercilessly followed up with an attack of his own using Barbaros. However, Aegis had already finished the construction of its barrier and lay ready.

The sound of their clash rang out. Sparks of mana flashed and the mana particles dispersed as if evaporating. They held their breath because the clash between spear and shield, while only lasting a few seconds, felt like an eternity.

Fanon let the barrier take the onslaught as she leisurely stood there. She looked at the spear tips through the barrier and poured more mana into that barrier.

As Aegis’s radiance increased, Barbaros’s spears heated up, glowing red.

“Ugh! Not yet! I still have more! I can’t—I won’t acknowledge a snotty little

brat like you is a Single!” yelled Gordon.

Barrier versus claws. The points of contact shone with an abnormal brilliance, as if all color had been blown away and only white remained.

Gordon let out another roar and the air shook with a shrill sound as he poured all his power into the unstoppable spear. Even so, Barbaros didn't so much as bite into the barrier.

Gordon had secretly calculated that this would become a battle of endurance. As long as he didn't run out of mana first, he would be able to break through eventually, but now he feared his calculation had been incorrect. Aegis remained so sturdy that he began to doubt himself.

Meanwhile, Fanon had overwhelming confidence in Aegis, which she continued to pour mana into while also fending off Suzar. She used three of the remaining five plates to cut off his line of fire.

Suzar clicked his tongue and tried to get around them, but Aegis stuck to him like glue, blocking him from shooting. Running out of patience, Suzar forcibly fired off a shot.

His Biamma created a violent firestorm bouncing off of the barrier.

Fanon furrowed her brow and raised a single finger from the umbrella shaft and bent it. Two shadows ran past her at high speed: Lurier and a male Magicmaster.

The Aegis System and its plates naturally had substance, but the barriers they created could allow magic from the inside to pass through without interference to a certain degree.

By utilizing that characteristic, they could launch one-sided attacks from behind the barrier.

The male Magicmaster moved ahead, with Lurier backing him up. He swung his AWR, a large sword, at Suzar, but the tip stopped two meters away from him. At the exact same time, the three plates split and created a gap in the middle, like a pathway. Just moments before his sword touched the ground, the squad members had poured ninety percent of their mana into it to produce a wind slash.

Although it was a quick move, Suzar dodged it with amazing reflexes and protected his face with his arms. The Wind Thrust hit the Lander the Box that Fanon had set up past him, causing the blast to scatter in all directions.

Even as the blast washed over him and he lost his balance, Suzar pointed the barrel of Caligula at the male Magicmaster and poured strength into the trigger. His eyes narrowed as he gazed into the gap in Aegis.

He'd poured more than enough mana in; all he needed to do was pull the trigger.

But in that moment, Suzar's eyes drifted away from the gap and he unhesitatingly pointed the barrel in a different direction—toward Lurier, who was approaching from another direction.

Lurier stamped her foot down to dash in when she found the barrel pointed directly at her. Even with the male Magicmaster's cooperation, she had been unable to take Suzar by surprise. However, there was no fear on her face. She gathered what mana she had left into her right hand.

Using her expert-level spell Flame Cradle, she planned to do everything in her power to complete her mission.

The scent of death lay thick between the two. The instant was stretched out, feeling like an eternity.

Suzar had his finger on the trigger about to fire a magic bullet, so with no time to think, Lurier acted on reflex and raised her right hand high as if scooping the ground. Her lack of hesitation made Suzar's eyes grow even colder, any and all emotions disappearing.

The next moment, Lurier's flaming red mana covered her arm as if exploding.

“*«Hiyaus Donoa»»*”

Next, she opened her palm and unleashed the flames of hell all at once. The ground turned to lava; everything else burned to ash.

Before the Flame Cradle could reach him, Suzar fired a magic bullet that stopped it. Mana clashed with mana as the magic bullet Soldora spun and emitted a shock wave strong enough to rattle your brain. Faced with the heat of

Lurier's spell, the bullet neither melted or collapsed. Instead it continued to rotate and emit unbearable vibrations.

"You little!" Lurier desperately tried to hold on as her arm was pushed back, but her shoulders couldn't take the enormous amount of mana required to maintain her balance. The magic bullet seemed to sense she'd reached her limit and burst.

The impact knocked out the flames around her arm and blew Lurier's body back. Fortunately, the male Magicmaster from before managed to catch her, but it didn't look like she would be able to fight anymore. She had only a paltry amount of mana left, so any further fighting would be suicide.

Her temporary partner had put his all into the previous Wind Thrust. After catching Lurier, he was breathing heavily as they looked at Suzar. Through the smoke and ash, they could see he'd fallen to one knee, but only because of the kickback from firing the magic bullet. He didn't seem badly damaged from the blast and stood up quickly.

Seeing that, Lurier bit her lip.

"You did well, considering your remaining mana," said Exceles.

At some point, Exceles had come to console them, but it only made Lurier feel their difference in ability more clearly. She'd done everything she could, but it seemed her chance encounter with Loki before had made a significant impact, because she didn't have enough mana. So her Hiyaus Donoa only had about half as much power as usual.

Suzar must have read as much and fired a magic bullet that was neither too strong nor too weak. It would do the least amount of damage, but he could take advantage of the blast to get away.

Lurier gritted her teeth, but Exceles tapped her on the shoulder and whispered, "Like I said, all you had to do was keep him from interfering. Thanks to you we're about done here."

Exceles looked over at Fanon and Gordon. While they looked evenly matched, the battle was about to enter a new stage.

In the end, it was Fanon, not Gordon, who broke the balance. She fearlessly

smiled as she emitted an enormous amount of mana, making Aegis shine even brighter. Gordon was stunned by what he saw. Aegis had answered Fanon's mana, and two more plates joined the three existing ones.

"I don't even need to use all eight of them. You are fundamentally and hopelessly wrong. There was never any way you'd stand a chance against me with that amount of mana."

Once she finished speaking, the barrier created by the five plates let out a small groan. The geometrical patterns of mana drawn in the air were expanding further, and it was clear from just a glance that the barrier had become even stronger.

"Guh?! D-Don't mess with me... This is the unstoppable spear! There's nothing that it can't pierce! What I desired can do even better than this!!!" Gordon exclaimed.

But eventually Aegis's barrier finished optimizing. Barbaros was repelled and Gordon's body was blown away. He rolled across the ground, gouging out pieces as he went.

Suzar ran up to him. "It looks like you're having a hard time."

"Ugh." Gordon ignored Suzar and finally pushed himself back up. He was bleeding quite a bit. His forehead was covered in blood, and scars covered his sturdy body.

"Unforgivable. Unforgivable!!!" Gordon howled, his veins popping as he coldly stared at Fanon.

"This is what happens if I get just a little serious? It's so one-sided, it's boring. Also, don't start screaming because you got sent flying. It's annoying," taunted the Hardest Magicmaster.

"Shut up, *I* will evaluate *you*! I will be the one to decide whether to recognize your power! It's the same here as in the Trojan Prison. I am the all-powerful arbiter!" Gordon yelled, still willing to fight, his face distorted in anger. "It seems I'm going to have to kill you after all. Yes, I will have to kill you, no matter what," Gordon muttered as if to convince himself.

In order to affirm himself, or rather all of his values, the arrogant giant of a

man was finally acknowledging Fanon as his mortal enemy. In the past, he had been Clevideet's pride, a Magicmaster of great ability and a potential future Single.

But that had all changed once this woman appeared. He fell from his position and was given the questionable post as warden of a secret prison. He had been forced to give up his rank and was not even allowed to call himself a Magicmaster when his days of watching over dirty prisoners began.

"I have worked so hard for my country for all of my life! Why do I have to be overtaken by a little girl like you?! I will kill you and prove that I was right! And I will deal with the top brass afterward too!"

Even as Gordon was cursing and grumbling, the mana around him was growing denser. Finally, a determined Gordon spoke up. "...Suzar, give me a hand. We're going to do that."

And Suzar emotionlessly answered, "Understood. Frankly, I'm relieved it didn't end up being left unused. Against such a formidable foe as this, it is certainly worth it."

"Yes, I'm sure it will be much more useful than firing at the trash that is the top brass! Ha ha, I wasn't wrong! This is far more enjoyable than following Dante's plot!" said Gordon.

"I agree," said Suzar.

Fanon's high-pitched laughter interrupted their exchange. "Aha ha ha ha ha ha... I was wondering what your problem was, but that was it? You were just jealous of me? Disgusting!" If that wasn't funny, what was? Fanon just laughed aloud and wiped the tears from the corners of her eyes. "And what are you convincing yourself of? Are you stupid? It seems you don't understand why you're going to die, so let me explain. I don't care if you stole some AWRs or went on a rampage in Clevideet. Your sin is making a fool of me, putting a scratch on my forehead. That is the only reason I need. Now repent or I will smash you to pieces!"

Fanon stared at the men with a wide-eyed, crazed expression. The squad members were exasperated by what she was saying but agreed in their hearts. After all, the bandits in front of them had ruined their captain's day off and her

enjoyable day of shopping at that.

They knew Fanon well, so they had a clear understanding of her anger and hate. The top brass's mission frankly didn't matter. It would be completed simply if the two bandits were slaughtered. It was more important to let Fanon go on a rampage and vent her frustrations.

"The time of judgment has come!" Fanon declared when Suzar fired off Biamma right at her. However, she didn't so much as flinch. She flippantly moved a hand to block the rain of bullets with her barriers.

But this time the Aegis surrounded the attack so that it reflected and bounced around with the same destruction as before, easily silencing the attack. As the Hardest, the same attack wouldn't work on her twice. Moreover, their backs were toward a cliff. Lander the Box was piled up without a gap, cutting off their escape.

Yet...in the midst of the flames and smoke left from Biamma, a point of mana light was starting to glow where Gordon was.

"Lady Fanon!" Exceles said cautiously.

Even as she warned Fanon, the eerie light grew more radiant as it gathered even more power. It originated from the magic stone in Barbaros's palm. The magic beam emitted from that had been what caused such damage to Clevideet when Gordon and Fanon had fought last time.

"Block this!"

As Gordon shouted, a very thick beam fired from Barbaros's palm. The deadly ray was mostly made up of mana with multiple attributes that erased everything in its surroundings. It was so hot it evaporated trees, air, flesh, and steel all the same.

Exceles used all of her capabilities to analyze its performance. At long last the hidden trump card of the unstoppable spear was revealed. "...It's a three-attribute composite spell!"

It used a stable earth attribute as a base and coupled it with the electricity attribute to raise its range, accuracy, and duration. The fire attribute brought out its full power to create a beam of destruction.

Just being able to use multiple attributes was enough to gain a high ranking among Magicmasters, but most could only use them individually and nothing more. Yet Gordon was using three attributes at all times. Only a handful of Magicmasters could perform such a feat.

So Barbaros really is an anti-Aegis weapon?! This spell exceeds the power of expert-level magic! thought Exceles.

She narrowed her eyes as the light of overwhelming violence turned the area surrounding the squad pure white. The squad was lined up behind Fanon, their hands behind their backs and their feet slightly wider than their shoulders. Not a single one tried to escape, choosing to remain where they stood. They entrusted their lives to their captain and held absolute faith in her barriers.

Seeing their resolution, Exceles let out a small sigh.

If there's one thing the members of this squad can do, it's read the room.

Before them, all eight plates gathered, spreading out like the feathers of a peacock while creating a vast number of barriers. A moment later the massive heat ray reached the barrier, causing an explosive impact. It was so bright that it was hard to even keep their eyes open; the trees around them were completely eradicated.

Not even Aegis could calculate how powerful the beam was.

"Exceles! Get ready!" said Fanon, narrowing her eyes.

"Okay!" Before Fanon could finish speaking, Exceles had already braced herself. She immediately removed the clasp of the cylinder she carried, although this one was more angular than the one that carried the Aegis System.

Exceles put on the belt with practiced hands and held out the pillar-shaped part to Fanon, who pushed the umbrella shaft into it. As it fit into place, the pillar made a mechanical sound. In the next moment, several magic formulas engraved in the outer circumference activated and its entire appearance changed.

What ultimately appeared had a similar form to that of a mortar.

"But...Lady Fanon, are you sure it is a good idea to change the shape of the

Aegis in this situation?” Exceles whispered just in case.

Fanon spat back, “They’re not that foolish. Besides, Aegis has its own weakness, you know that.”

Aegis System was weak against magic it had never seen before. It had accumulated data from all of the spells that the Fanon squad had encountered, but there were still many spells that it didn’t know, such as the one Alus Reigin had used before.

Taking the attack once would allow the umbrella shaft to accumulate data, but the risk lay in having to take the attack once. Now that Aegis had taken the ultimate beam that Gordon and Barbaros had unleashed, Exceles wondered what there was to worry about.

But just then, another yet unknown spell jolted Exceles’s sense and gave her a wave of displeasure. The rank 1 Spotter’s special ability had certainly picked up on the danger.

Before long, the special bruise spread to cover half of her face.

“Oh no...Lady Fanon!”

“I know. That’s what the second part is for!”

Fanon turned the angular muzzle to the front and supported it with her slender arms.

Exceles’s bruise ached, and she couldn’t accurately read what the enemy was doing.

The new signal was emanating from a massive source of mana next to Gordon. It was at the barrel of Suzar’s Caligula, and Exceles could clearly feel that it was gathering in what was probably a single magic bullet.

It wasn’t as wild as what Barbaros had just fired. In fact, the freezing cold air stimulated Exceles’s bruise. It seemed that Fanon’s decision was correct. It would have been too late to prepare for it after sensing it.

Eventually, Caligula was charged with enough mana and Suzar fired the magic bullet without hesitation. A high-pitched sound shook the air, threatening to rupture eardrums and any magical structure in its way. It was as if mana itself

was lamenting—a shock wave that sounded like a scream of resentment filled their surroundings.

Veliklagen...to think he could actually use it! Exceles marveled.

Exceles knew the name of that magic bullet. Legend had it that when the magic structure for it was completed and its power became reality on the testing ground, none of the top brass wanted to open their mouths.

The power literally touched on the taboo. It couldn't be imbued in a normal or magical bullet, so it required special munitions...which meant that it must have been stolen alongside Caligula. That fact hadn't reached Fanon's squad, perhaps from the top brass's desire to save face, so they would be made to pay for that afterward.

Exceles bit her lip, looking indignant.

Suzar was a first-rate sniper who exceeded the data on him. She realized he must have been aiming for the Aegis System's only opening.

Veliklagen was without a doubt a new spell for Aegis. It also most likely had some sort of special property that would neutralize any normal defenses, such as being caught or repelled...

Exceles turned to Fanon with panic, but in the next moment, the tension in her jaw loosened ever so slightly.

As one might expect, Fanon's expression was unchanged, with preparations already complete to face the spell. She'd poured mana into her AWR and the structure for her spell was complete.

This was Thousand Roar.

The unique mortar-shaped AWR roared. Countless walls of light, similar to mirrors, deployed while rotating.

In principle, up to a thousand ultrathin barriers were lined up inside of the barrel and explosively compressed mana pushed them forward. Like a domino effect, the pressure applied to one barrier was conveyed to the next, and through the barrel's mechanism that process rapidly accelerated.

The continuous sound of barriers colliding came from within the barrel,

combining into a single explosive sound. The barriers accelerated due to the aforementioned mechanism, and before reaching two hundred collisions it had already exceeded the speed of sound.

Fanon had set up a total of three hundred barriers this time. Considering the time they had, that should get the job done.

Since the AWR fired a magical barrier rather than a physical shell, air resistance was dramatically decreased, and by the time it was fired, the barriers had overwhelming destructive and piercing power.

Thousand Roar intercepted the magic bullet approaching Fanon and her squad in the nick of time. And so the unstoppable spear and unbreakable shield clashed once more.

As Exceles had predicted, Veliklagen's property allowed it to nullify the concept of hardness. It likely annihilated the bonding of mana particles. The cruel bullet shattered the supersonic barriers like they were nothing, and it showed no sign of slowing down.

But after going through ten, then twenty of them, it seemed to start slowing down, although this was the first time anything had even come that far against Thousand Roar.

At the thirty-barrier mark, the offense and defense were reversed. The magic bullet was swallowed up by the swarm of barriers, and then the continuous wave of barriers instantly assaulted Gordon and Suzar.

They didn't even have time to dodge. The pistonlike impacts tortured Gordon and Suzar. They were pushed into the Lander the Box behind them, cutting off their retreat.

Thousand Roar's attack continued as well. Their bodies were smashed into the cube, and finally, they were smashed through the cubes and sent flying hundreds of meters.

After letting out a final roar, which seemed to be a condensation of various things, it finally came to a stop. The barrel had fired barriers like bullets without pause, but it was now smoking red-hot.

Once she saw that everything was over, Fanon threw the barrel to the ground

and pulled the umbrella shaft out of it.

“But...I don’t think they’re dead yet. Good, it would be boring if this ended too soon,” Fanon muttered, wearing the smile of a predator.

The fact that the men were not dead was partly because Fanon had adjusted the speed and power, but also thanks to Gordon’s final use of Barbaros. It reduced the damage. But it only managed to do so because Veliklagen had succeeded in destroying dozens of barriers.

That said, they were on their last legs.

Gordon lay bleeding all over, the armor stripped from his Barbaros. The fitting inside of him must have been coming loose. In that case, he would no longer be able to control it, let alone use it as an AWR.

Suzar’s left arm, which had been holding Caligula, had been ripped off at the shoulder and lay in an unrecognizable lump. Blood poured from the wound, forming a pool on the ground. Pieces of the AWR were scattered around him.

“Does it hurt? It hurts, doesn’t it? Maybe I should have been a little gentler,” Fanon said with a twisted grin, allowing her mana to overflow from her body to demonstrate their difference in ability.

Glancing at Gordon and Suzar staggering to get up, Fanon laughed in a low voice. “A former Single candidate? What a joke. I’m in a different dimension from you, you third-rater.”

She wasn’t trying to tear away at their will to fight. She just wanted to push her injured prey further and watch them run around in vain.

And one more thing...

As expected, Gordon, his face twisted with humiliation, was still moving.

“Lady Fanon, I believe this is over. As for the AWR...it looks like it is about to run out of mana,” Exceles said in dismay as she watched Gordon and Suzar attempt to limp away.

Fanon smiled and narrowed her eyes at the dazzling ray that was Barbaros’s last gasp. She calmly said, “I see you’ve forgotten your pride as a soldier.”

If Gordon had honestly acknowledged defeat, she might have felt a tiny

inkling of desire to show him sympathy. She might have even considered the option of capturing him without killing him.

Exceles would have stopped her, of course.

Regardless, now that last chance had passed. Seeing the two criminals brazenly run away, Fanon decided to proceed with the final stage of her plan.

“Well...it’s not tag, but why not wait a little longer. The ending is a given already. Exceles, don’t forget to track and follow their current location,” Fanon said.

“I don’t mind...but it would be bad to continue going any farther within Alpha. Our surroundings have already been destroyed this much,” argued Exceles.

“It’s okay. I have a plan. Besides, even if something happened we can just have the ruler or governor-general cover for us.”

“Very well,” said Exceles with a sigh. “By the way, you noticed that Barbaros wasn’t the real unstoppable spear, didn’t you?”

Fanon looked like she wanted to play it off for a moment, but she soon grinned, confirming Exceles’s suspicion. “Naturally I noticed. Did you forget the name of my AWR? Ah...it was Clevideet’s pride, the Greatest Paradox, wasn’t it? I see, so the research was already complete...and Barbaros was just one of the prototypes created in the process.”

Fanon cast a glance at the AWR she’d thrown away before arrogantly answering, “Yes. Aegis is no doubt the unbreakable shield. And the unstoppable spear is that Thousand Roar smoking over there. It just means that I was already in possession of both the shield and spear. There was never any need to worry. Barbaros was only a spare in case the unstoppable spear broke.”

I never knew. Does that mean that the last part of the Three Precept Contradiction is our ruler’s greatest insurance? Well, I’m sure Lady Fanon must have yielded in that regard.

Exceles thought there was nothing she didn’t know about Fanon, but she was surprised to learn that there had most likely been a secret agreement behind the scenes.

At any rate, that explained why the ruler, Clough, was so lenient with Fanon. She was, indeed, the only one who could negotiate directly with that experienced ruler. Normally it would be left up to the governor-general, but Clough must have wanted to keep the trigger for the ultimate weapon at his side. That was why he always tried to stay in Fanon's good graces.

I wonder which was superior between the spear and shield, thought Exceles.

Noticing her curiosity, Fanon spoke with a surprisingly earnest countenance. "Does it interest you? You may not be a combatant, but I can see how it would."

"Yes. With both the spear and shield in your possession, they've never directly clashed, have they? Well, you do specialize in barrier magic so I suppose that Aegis would come out on top," said Exceles.

"I think so too. Attack magic sees progress every year, but once spells get too strong, they touch on taboo. So there's a limit to human reason. Meanwhile, Aegis will continue to evolve together with me. So it should be able to reach the top of the world eventually," Fanon said before turning around and looking into the distance.

Ahead of her lay Alpha's vast lands. It also held the rank 1...standing at the top of all Magicmasters. Fanon fell silent for a moment before changing gears. "Okay, it's about time. Let's clean things up."

Exceles nodded. Gordon and Suzar had put up a struggle, but now they were heavily injured. There was no longer any way for them to escape Exceles's special sense, Eilvenifus.

Conveniently, the criminals hadn't been heading for Alpha but the Outer World. Exceles realized that Fanon had pushed them in that direction from the start, as that was the only gap left in her encirclement. Now that she understood that, they would just need to do what was necessary for their country.

The strict second-in-command gave orders to the squad: "I want you to recover Caligula. Well, considering the shape it's in, collect as many parts as you can."

"Ah, uhm. What were we supposed to recover again?" Lurier asked with a

blank face after saluting.

“Now’s not the time to be playing around...”

“I’m sorry. I think one of my eardrums ruptured in the previous battle,” said Lurier, pointing at one of her ears, which had blood coming out of it. Despite that she was acting as usual.

Exceles was exasperated by how unfazed Lurier was. “You skimped on the mana to protect yourself, didn’t you? Not that I think it would help.” Exceles sighed. “I understand. Lurier, you can help as much as you can.”

Lurier was certainly an excellent subordinate, but Exceles needed to deal with the girl’s bad habit of letting her guard down at odd moments. It probably had to do with Fanon being lax with the female squad members too.

But, Lurier has the most firepower in this squad aside from Lady Fanon.

Exceles was furrowing her brow at the quandary when Fanon rushed her along. “Exceles, just the gun barrel should be enough. That’s most important.”

As she could see on Veliklagen, Caligula’s barrel also had taboo magic formulas engraved in it. Fanon would be satisfied as long as that was recovered.

“I understand. Then let me tell you Gordon and Suzar’s coordinates,” said Exceles.

“All right, then let the hunt begin.” Fanon decided that just she and Exceles would give chase, leaving the rest to recover Caligula and restore the area to some degree. “Take that, and that, and that!”

With matters settled, Fanon brought out her usual fancy umbrella and swung it around in high spirits. With each swing, Lander the Box rained down from the sky. It was a far cry from the girlish and fancy view of the world that she preferred, but it seemed the slender and petite captain was getting carried away by the excitement of the hunt reaching its climax.

So Exceles decided to overlook the more trivial things. “Lady Fanon. They’re passing Clevideet’s border and exiting to the Outer World.”

“Finally.” The prey entering the hunt grounds proper caused the edges of Fanon’s lip to curl up.

A short while later, Fanon and Exceles were within Clevideet...more specifically near a military facility near the edge of Babel's protection.

"Gordon and Suzar are moving slowly. Their injuries are slowing them, and they are still well within range," Exceles noted.

Clevideet's outer wall had been built two years ago, and it was outside of Babel's barrier, slightly outside of Clevideet's borders. In other words, it was a bridgehead for humanity. The weather in the Outer World today was cloudy. The air was humid and small dust storms occasionally blew in.

Fanon and Exceles stood on top of an outer wall that easily exceeded thirty meters. There was a vast forest below as far as the eye could see. Gordon and Suzar were hiding in it and were, of course, invisible. They were likely trying to hide until night, when Fiends would grow more active.

There were currently five Magicmasters positioned on top of the wall. Once they noticed Fanon and Exceles they greeted the two with flawless salutes.

The female leader spoke with utmost respect to Fanon. "Lady Fanon, how do you do? I am the platoon leader of the third defense force—"

Before the woman could continue with the usual military routine, Exceles interrupted her. "We know of you, Embique. You can skip your introduction."

Embique was a female Magicmaster in her thirties. She was in the first half of Triple Digit Magicmasters and in charge of the defense here.

"Understood. Excuse me, Lady Exceles," said Embique. "You are indeed a well-informed person."

"Of course, I also know that you are in charge here."

"Thank you very much. It is an honor to have Lady Fanon use our Organ. While I might be in charge, I could never hope to use that thing..."

"I can imagine." Exceles nodded.

Fanon picked up where she left off. "Well, it'd be a serious problem if we had to use it all the time."

"Lady Fanon is right. Of course, we are evacuating all Magicmasters within a three-kilometer perimeter. Maintenance is flawless, and it's ready to fire at any

time. And since this will serve as a live fire test as well, the technical department has requested to analyze the information afterward,” said Embique.

“Even the technical department wants in on it? I imagine there aren’t many chances for them to get live fire data. How passionate they must be.” Exceles shrugged before turning back to the small captain at her side. “Well, do as you please. Now, Lady Fanon, it’s time for the final preparations. How is your mana?”

“I’ve used up quite a bit, but I plan on using up most of what I have left here,” said Fanon.

“I understand. Like I said before, leave the cleanup to me,” responded Exceles.

Finally, at long last, Fanon and Exceles headed to an area with a magic circle drawn in the middle of the wall. Around it cables for transporting mana were buried in the wall.

“Be careful not to trip, Lady Fanon,” Embique said as Fanon took her extended hand and stepped inside of the operation box within the magic circle.

After that, the steel entry gate slammed shut with a heavy sound. In front of Fanon were impressive devices and a control board with various symbols. It only took an instant to identify her, then various data was displayed and a lamp-like magic light lit up the board.

“Exceles, what of our targets’ coordinates?” asked Fanon.

“I am tracking them now.”

“Then we’re all set. Fixed Defensive Battery, Organ, activating. Deploying all cannons and beginning charging mana.”

As Fanon spoke, the cannons within the walls extended and pointed outside. There were close to a hundred. All of them were linked via data and controllable via the control board. The other nations had likely picked up on the existence of the connected fixed battery AWR, Organ...its imposing appearance built into the strategically placed wall was the pride of Clevideet.

A massive amount of mana flowed from Fanon's body, causing the magic circle to glow an unusual greenish blue light. The mana was absorbed into the magic circle and condensed. The formula shone intensely and flowed into the interior through the cables stretched around it.

"W-Wonderful! What a miraculous amount of mana! I am truly moved. To think you could supply the mana of a hundred people all by yourself! As expected of Clevideet's very own Single!" Embique jumped from simple amazement to sincere admiration, bending her knees in a grand gesture of respect.

Before the last bit of mana was poured in, Exceles reached out to touch the tips of Fanon's fingers. When Gordon and Suzar had attacked the capital city, Fanon had only been able to protect all the citizens thanks to Exceles telling Fanon their location.

As long as Exceles was by her side, Fanon could perceive her target with her entire body. Through her Spotter, Fanon was able to see an overhead view of another world, the magic domain.



When Fanon put her hand on the control board, it instantly read the coordinates and performed the necessary arithmetic operations. The fine-tuning of the cannon's firing angles happened all at once, and the heavy moving sound slowly shook the wall.

"Get pulverized," Fanon said as she thrust out her arm. With that, Organ fired the mana they had stored and played a song of destruction.

Black spots filled the Outer World's sky. The target area was covered in flames, but the barrage continued, changing the very terrain and burning down anything that had existed there.

Organ had a specific magic formula, like Claymore, incorporated into it. As long as mana was charged, it didn't matter what attribute the user had. A bombardment equivalent to an advanced-level fire spell would fire.

After firing around a thousand shots, the bombardment ceased and the view from the top of the wall had completely changed. Whatever the level of magic, with these numbers the level of destruction would exceed an expert-level spell.

Embique's jaw had dropped as she blankly stared at the Outer World, which was covered in flames and smoke. Organ hadn't seen much use since being installed, but even when it had, there had never been a bombardment like this before. Just a glance made it easy to understand the monstrous amount of mana a Single had and why soldiers and even rulers would cling to that power.

Embique's ears were ringing, but when she heard a distant voice she hurriedly looked that way.

"Lady Fanon!"

Embique saw Exceles wrap her arms around a collapsed Fanon. Fanon was pale, her body exhausted, and her legs unmoving. "Wh-Wh-What happened?!" she asked.

"Lady Fanon ran out of mana. However, we must leave her here and depart for the Outer World right away. We are in the middle of a mission," said Exceles.

Exceles's tense expression gave Embique goose bumps. The only instructions

she had received before they had arrived was that if Organ was used, they were to maintain it.

Embique couldn't believe that not only had it been used, something like this had happened. "Then please leave it to my platoon," she said.

"No, that won't be necessary. Lady Fanon's squad will take care of the rest. This concerns a top secret mission from the top brass. We ask that you, instead, do a complete checkup of Organ."

"Understood. We will take care of it, Lady Exceles." With a respectful salute, Embique headed back inside the protective wall.

After watching Embique and her soldiers walk away, Exceles hurriedly carried Fanon into the emergency room. Having picked up on what happened, members of the squad were waiting.

Exceles instructed them to immediately head for the target location. Even with that level of firepower, the base of Barbaros should still be at the site. After all, unlike Caligula, Barbaros's base was made out of superhard meteor metal.

"Lady Fanon will require some rest, so I will take charge of the squad. Now let's hurry and complete the retrieval mission!"

At the beautiful second-in-command's call, the outer wall buzzed with activity again. Having prepared the bare minimum of equipment, the elites of the Fanon squad leaped into the Outer World.

Eighty-Ninth Chapter

Professor and Puppeteer

Quite some time ago, though harsh cold winds blew in the border region between Clevideet and Iblis, traces of smoke rose here and there from the secret Trojan Prison, built in the Outer World. The prisoners' riot had come to an end and the clamor of the prison break was finally winding down.

But at the very bottom of the atrium, which gave an overview of the prison, a terrible and gruesome scene unfolded, a far cry from the silence that had fallen on the facility. A mountain of bodies had been piled up from the fifth layer all the way up to the upper layers. Wardens and the other workers had all been killed by escaped prisoners taking out their grudges on them.

The smell of fresh blood was everywhere, but it was still a marked improvement over the rotten smell of dead prisoners that had hung over the prison before. The prison had been left practically deserted; it was like a solemn iron box.

Inside it, the sound of footsteps reverberated from the steel floor and walls. A figure languidly walked with her back hunched and her hands in her pockets. She weaved through the bodies strewn about until she reached a specific ghastly-looking corpse.

She stared at the deceased crazed professor Gordon had once called Professor Kwinska. She had been buried in a wall. Her skull had been crushed. Blood had sprayed all over her white gown and dried into red stains.

The figure sighed and muttered, "They sure went wild. Just what would they take a professor's important brain for? Still, what a strange feeling...to look down at my own corpse like this. I should thank Warden Gordon for giving me such a rare experience."

With shaky hands, the new Professor Kwinska pulled out a cigarette from the gown's pocket. She lit a match and held it to a cigarette. The dirty white gown

she wore was the same as the one the slaughtered corpse before her wore. The length and color of her hair, her face, her height, and even her way of speaking was the very same as the late Professor Kwinska.

Rather, the new professor was a little cleaner, having had a bath recently.

“Now then, now that the troublesome Gordon and others are gone, I suppose there was some value in delaying my arrival...oh?” Professor Kwinska muttered before surprise showed on her face. She cast a glance into the darkness of a cell in the distance. “Hmph, did you not escape with the rest, gramps?”

There was no answer. But there was definitely a person’s presence. The cell door was open, but several tubes for the provisional punishment ran into it. It would seem that the captured sinner had been given the heaviest punishment the Trojan Prison gave.

Of course, now that the prison had stopped functioning, the provisional punishment wasn’t draining any mana any longer either.

So it didn’t make sense. The door to the cell was already wide open. Since the old man had been locked away in the fifth layer, he was no doubt a heinous criminal. And considering the tubes, his fate had been nothing but despair. He was never intended to see the open sky again, as his mana would be drained until he died.

Yet the elderly man had chosen not to escape to the surface with the other prisoners.

“Well, no matter, Gram. I recall that you had special circumstances. I pray you will be able to get out of here someday. Now, I have a little more to do, so I will take my leave. Oh and by the way, what’s happened here has already reached Iblis. I imagine it will spread to Clevideet soon too. I’m sure their people will fly here any moment, so you can relax,” the professor said arrogantly, finally prompting the old man called Gram to part his dried lips.

“Who...are...you? What...do you...know.” It wasn’t the voice of an elderly man crying for help but one sharp as an investigator about to reach the heart of a mystery.

“Hmm? So you could still talk. What a shame. As two old people I’m sure

there's much we could have talked about," Professor Kwinska said.

But Professor Kwinska's appearance was no older than someone in her thirties, while Gram looked to be past his eighties.

However, the professor paid no mind to such inconsistencies, turned to the old man with a soft smile, and elatedly puffed out some cigarette smoke. "Who am I, huh...? I guess I will introduce myself as someone who uncovers mysteries. A researcher, as you can see. Does that answer satisfy you?"

The man said nothing.

"I don't mind the silence. So while you're at it, I'd like you to keep silent about me too. After all, I am currently invested in unraveling the mystery of a foolish religious doctrine of wisdom. What you would call the Four Books of Fegel."

The moment he heard that, the old man's eyes opened wide, his emaciated, skin-and-bone body shaking and glaring at the shady professor. "What will...you do...after unraveling that?"

"Nothing at all. Like I said, I am a researcher. After uncovering the truth and taking it in as knowledge, I will name it and keep it in my collection," said Professor Kwinska. "I don't know what happens after that, and I don't care."

"As if you could...be trusted. Scum..."

"Yes, I suppose it might be strange for somebody who experimented on several of the prisoners here to say such things. Well, if the knowledge I discovered and organized is ever passed on to someone else, I can only hope it will be used well. You can pray for such a future too, gramps," Professor Kwinska said with a thin smile and a strangely tired expression. She pensively flicked her cigarette away. "Don't worry. I won't become one of the seat holders, and I've found the ideal individual to take that position. They will become my research partner."

"What do you...mean by seat holder...?" asked Gram.

"It is one of the people who will know when the time comes, I suppose," Professor Kwinska answered. "Well then, if you will excuse me. It was fun chatting with you, Gram."

The old man did not respond again.

Casting one last glance at her own corpse, a clone, Professor Kwinska began walking. She was headed for her laboratory in the upper layers. Her stride as languid as ever, a fearless light filled her eyes. Philosophical questions like who was the clone and who was the original were no longer relevant in her mind.

If they shared the same knowledge, memories, and experiences, the emotions born from it all would be the very same. If someone were to debate with their clone, they would gain and lose nothing, accomplishing nothing but wasting their time.

Professor Kwinska found it a bother. As she climbed the stairs to the upper layers, she brought out another cigarette, but this time she just held it in her mouth, not feeling like lighting it up.

“Still...a seat holder, huh. Dante slipped up in his hurry. In the end, it seemed he never truly realized what I was researching.”

Having examined Dante’s blood and that of all the other prisoners in the Trojan Prison, there was something Professor Kwinska had come to learn.

The Fundamental Words within Dante’s mana information body was truly interesting. Biologically speaking, it was like his DNA was fundamentally different from that of any human in any of the seven nations.

And it wasn’t on the trivial level of racial differences either. Dante’s DNA was strange and abnormal... It was almost as if he’d been born and raised in a magical environment that was completely different from the human domain.

Dante might just be a human from the outside. Or maybe he has the qualifications of a seat holder? No, I suppose not. It might not matter anymore anyways. He has probably only read through two of the four books, she thought.

Professor Kwinska began to mutter as if talking to someone. When it came to organizing her thoughts around the Four Books of Fegel, Professor Kwinska had a habit of putting her thoughts into words.

“But perhaps by understanding the Four Books of Fegel, he learned that parts of the mana information can be rewritten by reading specific sections.”

Nobody knew anything about Dante's upbringing. With no family register and no relatives, all that existed was an imposing criminal record.

The humanity of today was all squeezed into the seven nations built around the Tower of Babel in order to escape the threat of Fiends. Naturally, that meant that all kinds of people, languages, and cultures were intermingled.

However, the foundation of the mana information body was pretty much the same for all humans. That likely changed in the process of using practical magic for their standard lives, and higher-ranking Magicmasters were even more different...which gave for a form of evolution.

Dante's mana was different, and it wasn't just a matter of his upbringing. The professor surmised that it was a difference in roots. It originated from a completely different magical system from that of humanity.

Mana is history. It exceeds the individual and is inherited like blood... Now, I wonder how much the person in question knew.

However, upon touching a portion of the Four Books of Fegel, Dante had felt like he'd learned the truth of the world and gotten carried away. As a result, he'd grown arrogant and gotten caught up in his own power. He was ruined. As a researcher, she had long ago lost interest in them, but in a sense, they were rivals in search for the same goal.

"Ha ha, then maybe I should at least move a little more cautiously? I may have read the Four Books of Fegel, but I will never become a seat holder. After all, it's nothing more than a copy of the Akashic Records," Professor Kwinska continued to mutter as she finished ascending to the second layer.

Suddenly she came to a stop. She looked down to where Dante's cell had been. Dante had doubted whether she knew about the escape plan, but to Professor Kwinska it would be strange if she didn't.

The professor was in charge of the mana storage, and she would immediately see through any petty tricks. Everything in the prison followed a strict daily routine. As such, even the slightest oddity would stand out like a sore thumb.

"'Crazy Professor' huh...? Ha ha."

Professor Kwinska knew that Dante had begun calling her that at some point.

Before long, the derogatory nickname had spread through the prison, and even Gordon and the wardens would use it behind her back.

“No matter how incomprehensible it may be, it is nothing more than a difference in aim. By the time you simplify the phenomenon and unilaterally decide that the other party’s brain is inferior to yours, you’ve grown too arrogant. You were still so wet behind the ears, Dante.”

The professor lit her last cigarette, inhaling once before flicking it down the stairs. “I guess it’s about time to get going.”

Professor Kwinska headed through the staff entrance before climbing up another set of stairs and opening the door to her laboratory. Since it was built in the Outer World, it was bare-bones and had nothing unnecessary.

She walked through several pieces of neatly lined-up equipment and pushed her palm against the wall in the far end of the room, where she heard the sound of a machine authenticating her identity somewhere.

This was Professor Kwinska’s rear garden, a hidden place that nobody in the Trojan Prison knew about...her second laboratory. The special room was located in a side hole secretly dug by prisoners who had been taken out for research purposes.

Gathering the equipment had been a pain, but having spent so many years at the prison she’d gotten the hang of how far she could go. The government would gladly deliver a wide variety of materials and equipment for any reason, be it maintenance for the mana storage or the prisoners’ mental well-being, as long as they were paid.

With a click the lights turned on, revealing lined-up vats filled with liquid chemicals. Each was large enough for an adult to lie down in, and inside each of them was an identical figure.

Just how many times had her current body woken up one of her clones from one of these cradles? It had begun before the Trojan Prison was built; it was probably around ten of them.

“It’s a bit of a waste, but considering what’s happened...they will need to be disposed of before a survey team shows up.”

The professor input the self-destruct code, causing the chemical tubes to disconnect and the vessels to topple over... And with a bubbling sound and smoke, the clones melted and disappeared.

At the same time, a figure in the back of the room walked forward, shaking away the smoke. She was wearing a rag cloth...the same cloth Professor Kwinska would use when she sat down in the chair on the back of the room.

The professor grinned at the woman and spoke, "So how do you find this body? ...Well, it's not the original, but that one's currently rotting in a cell way down there. This is the second time I've helped you."

Scooping up a handful of her soaked black hair and observing it, the woman looked somewhat confused. It was probably because she'd only just woken up. Her eyes were still stern, but there was a hint of compassion or motherly affection to her.

She was tall and slender...however, a single glance made it clear that her soul wasn't on the side of good. Within the depths of her calm-looking eyes was a destructive impulse on the verge of insanity; it was a dangerous balance.

She didn't seem to have a clear memory of what had happened in the past, but at the very least, some gruesome incident must have left a deep impression on her. The sight of her surrounded by blood and flames called to mind that she was indeed the mass murderer behind the Vivid Bloodletting Incident.

Professor Kwinska wasn't one to say, considering her own human experimentation, but there was something fundamentally different about this woman.

"So, how are your memories, Nox?"

"...Yes, they are probably fine. No...I likely remember what I have to do. All according to plan perhaps? With the body of the puppet Dakia, who was so attached to Mekfis, destroyed...all that's left is Elise."

Nox put a finger on her temple as she ran through her deeper memories. "Before that is...Alus Reigin. He killed me in the past... No, I managed to use my secret art before that but ended up captured and put in the Trojan Prison...? It's no good, my memories are still foggy. The only thing that's clear is that this is

my body.”

Professor Kwinska, who’d been looking her over, shrugged her shoulders as if to say that was obvious. “You are a clone, but you are no different from the corpse rotting in the bottom layer—apart from youth and performance. This body has only just recently been artificially created, so some gaps in your memory can’t be helped. But however hastily made it may be, it should be better than this poor body of mine. It should perform better than before.”

“Hmm, I suppose I owe you my thanks, Professor,” said Nox. “Although I can’t say that I’ve gotten a feel for the performance yet.” Nox seemed to be gaining at least enough memory to keep up with what Professor Kwinska was saying.

“In a rush or not, I don’t cut any corners. I even went through the effort of tuning your body, you might even be able to have children.”

“Oh. Is that another portion of God’s wisdom from the Four Books of Fegel?” Nox wiped her body with the rag cloth and surmised that it was knowledge from someone else.

Professor Kwinska scoffed at the sarcasm, put her hands in her pockets, and bragged, “The Four Books of Fegel are just a copy. My interest lies in the original. Did you forget even that?”

Meanwhile, Nox, no longer hesitant, headed for a locker by the wall and grabbed the new clothes prepared for her. “No, I remember. That’s why I need to get my hands on ‘that.’”

Professor Kwinska looked at Nox’s face and probed her intentions. “And what would ‘that’ be?”

“The fourth of the Four Books of Fegel, Audeogecht... I first have to get my hands on that.”

“Why?”

“...That doesn’t matter. I have to get Audeogecht... My memories are still a blur, but that much is clear.” A strong, dark fire burned in Nox’s eyes.

It was a deep-rooted delusion, like someone obsessed with jewels, only her desire was absolute. Even if she didn’t know why, a determination to get her

hands on it filled Nox's body.

That was probably a consequence of the gaps in her memories. But that wasn't so much of a side effect of her new body as much as it was caused by her own abilities.

Nox had been like that since Professor Kwinska met her in the Trojan Prison. The core part of her memory had already been wiped out, so her recollections of those days were doubtful.

Transferring consciousness into a dead body was a unique technique, something that people in the occult field might call a possession. It was next to impossible for a dark-element Magicmaster to pull off, but since it had been pulled off in front of her eyes, Professor Kwinska found herself very interested in the woman.

Considering that the original body with half of the consciousness left had been left crippled, most of her mana information had likely been transferred to the new body as well. The professor surmised that it was the reason for the gap in information.

I imagine there are other side effects as well. After all, the underlying memory for Nox's motive to search for Audeogecht is completely missing. That too seems to have been snatched away from the depths of her consciousness. That said, for now...

It went against Professor Kwinska's nature to leave the incomprehensible as it was, but considering the being before her, they were still far beyond the professor's control. Besides, this Nox would likely disappear somewhere soon. She was driven by a strong urge that would never run out.

Exasperated, the professor searched her pockets. When she finally found the pack, all that came out were cigarette butts. When she searched the desk drawers, she realized she'd run out of cigarettes. But having learned from past experience, she thoroughly looked through the drawers. With some luck, she might be able to find at least one.

"Well, do as you please. If I find some information on the Four Books of Fegel, I will let you know. As for your name...will you use Nox as before?" asked Professor Kwinska.

The woman thought for a while and shook her head. “No, I will go by Dakia Agnois. Nox died, and I don’t remember my real name, so I have no attachment to it. Besides, it wouldn’t do to have the name of an infamous criminal. I wouldn’t want the attention that the name Nox would bring me, especially from higher-ranking military.”

“So what happened to Dakia’s body? I imagine it should be rotting right about by now. I kept the embalming to a minimum at your request.”

“Yes, the timing is just about right. Her body was very easy to use, but Mekfis destroyed it. If possible, I wanted it to be rotting in nature.”

“You must have had some emotional attachment to it. I don’t know if you remember, but you came knocking with the body in your arms.”

“Right, I did,” Nox said.

Dakia was the name of a woman from Nox’s past. She was cheerful and charming, beloved by all. However, her body was frail, and while talented, she didn’t walk the path of a Magicmaster. She silently passed away at night at twenty. Her vast amount of mana was likely the reason for her death. She hadn’t tried to master handling mana and was unable to properly release it.

In the past, Nox, who at the time went by a name she could no longer remember, met Dakia—a woman who dreamed of becoming a Magicmaster—by chance.

She had lived happily but was also a pitiful woman who forever dreamed of possibilities that had ceased to exist. Nox wondered what kind of a face she had made when she breathed her last.

When she died, mana started leaking from her body, making it easy to locate her. Dakia’s room had been on the third floor of an elegant apartment complex facing a dirt road. Downstairs there was a bar and a bookstore, where Dakia had worked.

Nox had found her lying dead, covered by a thin cotton comforter, on her pipe bed and thin mattress the woman must have picked up somewhere. Her face was so beautiful it was hard to imagine she’d had any illness.

Nox had opened the window to ventilate the room and sat on the stile in the

night breeze for a while. There was no real reason for it; she just wanted to stay in the room for a while after seeing Dakia's face.

She still didn't understand why she'd set her eyes on her body and considered it a suitable receptacle. Maybe she wanted to fulfill Dakia's wish of becoming a Magicmaster...or maybe not. The only certainty was that it was a perfect situation to take advantage of. If Nox used Dakia's body, she would have plenty of opportunities to use the magic Dakia had wanted to use when alive.

Nox had secretly brought Dakia's body to Professor Kwinska, and they had used a chemical solution and a specially made refrigerated case to perfectly preserve her body.

That had been twenty and a few years ago.

Through various twists and turns, Nox had ended up in the criminal organization Kurama.

She'd been using an alias before, but in Kurama, she went by code name Nox and caused various gruesome incidents...until Alus Reigin dealt her a fatal blow.

After that, she had been secretly brought to the Trojan Prison, where she was reunited with Professor Kwinska. Because the doctor had been researching the body and consciousness, she took an interest in Nox's secret art and began making a clone.

Nox's secret art allowed her to transfer her consciousness, experience, and mana information into another body. Naturally, the core of it used mana as a medium for the process. In addition, Nox was able to link multiple bodies to her core and manipulate them.

However, there was too much noise if the multiple bodies were alive, especially if they were a Magicmaster using their mana. So she needed to use recently deceased bodies as her vessel. In that respect, reuniting with Professor Kwinska, who tinkered with bodies and handled dead prisoners, had been truly fateful.

With the doctor's help, she had abandoned her wounded body before her life expired and transferred to a new vessel, namely Dakia.

After abandoning her body and escaping the Trojan Prison, Nox had taken on

the role of Dakia Agnois, a female Magicmaster in service of the Hydrange military. That was who Alus had seen at the Friendship Magical Tournament.

She had spent all her time gathering information and mastering the essence of magic to fulfill foolish Dakia's wish. However, Mekfis had ultimately destroyed her body during one of their encounters. After that, she had had no choice but to operate using several of the female bodies the doctor had made, resulting in several new gains.

The largest had been discovering where Mekfis had hidden the first of the Four Books of Fegel. As a Hydrange Magicmaster, she had access to a wide variety of information through political channels.

It would have been best to recall her real name and discard the name Mekfis knew to take on a new identity, but she found herself attached to Dakia. It was the first alternative that came to mind after Nox, so she felt a connection to it.

The original Dakia's calm appearance had contradicted the anguish within her. A fatal disease had eroded such strong potential magical talents. As someone who always felt a disconnect between her mind and body, this body felt strangely familiar. That was why she had decided to continue using this name.

But above all...

"I feel more at ease being Dakia than Nox..."

When Nox had decided to identify as Dakia, she felt the tension in her relax a little. Professor Kwinska certainly felt that she was easier to speak with.

"Very well, Dakia. You work toward your goals, and I'll work toward mine. We only ever cooperated because it benefited both of us," said Professor Kwinska.

"Ah yes, I know that. So, any fun things happen while I was asleep?" asked Dakia.

Suddenly even the woman now known as Dakia's way of speaking changed to that of a simple girl. However, her body wasn't that of a girl but of an adult, so it did feel off.

The doctor's jaw relaxed, and she soon shrugged as the edges of her lip lifted

up. “That way of speaking doesn’t match your looks. To answer your question, naturally there was a big incident. I kept an eye on Vanalis and observed an interesting phenomenon. And I’m not talking about Mekfis’s petty trick of changing his appearance and closing off the area with snow using weather manipulation magic.”

“Hmm, who knows what he was after. But in the end I bet he failed, right?”

“...Who could say. More importantly, somebody accessed the Akashic Records there. Not me, not Kurama, and not Mekfis either. Can you imagine anything more exhilarating? Heh heh heh,” Professor Kwinska creepily laughed.

Dakia regained her composure and spoke. “So your wish finally came true. Oh, is that why you got rid of your precious clones?”

“Yes, what else could I call a junior overtaking my long years of research in a single leap other than exhilarating. Besides, I’m going to leave this place, and I can’t bring the clones with me. I do plan on taking the data with me before anyone from the Inner World shows up. If the clones could be packed up, that would have been fine, but the virtually augmented brains can’t yet store overlapping memories, nor can they operate simultaneously. If not handled properly, it could blow away the entire consciousness, leading to the self-destruction of the nerve cells.”

Dakia’s ability had elevated Professor Kwinska’s clone experiment, but even Dakia herself, a precious sample and collaborator, didn’t know the details of the experiment. What she understood was that it would be dangerous to have multiple clones active at the same time.

“So who was it that accessed the Akashic Records? Someone in Kurama? Mekfis?”

“From here,” answered Professor Kwinska, “all I was able to do was observe the phenomenon that Mekfis caused. All I know is that someone there was able to go beyond the realm of the forbidden and touch upon the knowledge of gods and demons. Regardless, accessing the Akashic Records requires a key. I will need to ascertain that, so there is plenty left to do.”

“It sounds like you have a lot to look forward to, then. Well, I guess it’s about time for me to leave,” said Dakia.

“I agree, but I do need you to bring me to the Inner World. A weak human like me couldn’t walk half a day through the Outer World. This body is not at all suited for combat. I probably couldn’t even last two seconds against the Fiends around here.”

“Yes, that was what we promised, after all,” Dakia muttered, recalling their deal.

After fully dressing, she left the laboratory together with Professor Kwinska. Once they were clear, Dakia pointed her arm behind her back toward the now unnecessary secret room and unleashed a giant magical flame without looking.

And so, two figures set out for the Inner World to make their return to the world of man: a reckless sage with no fear of god, trying to uncover infinite knowledge, and a grotesque Magicmaster, crazed by affection and in search of the origin of the soul.

Ninetieth Chapter

Divine Wisdom and Grimoire

Dante and his group's horrible attack on the Second Magical Institute would no doubt go down in history as a tragedy. While the first days of the new year normally passed by in a hurry, these had been instead marked by a rare upheaval and unprecedented acts of violence that resulted in deaths of guards and teachers.

Fiends were one thing, but an attack by criminals was shocking. In the aftermath of the attack, the Institute took the mental health of its students very seriously and gave them a long vacation.

A majority of the students returned to their parents, and daily life at the Institute became more solemn. The number of security guards who were clearly from the military increased, and a bleak atmosphere weighed heavily over the Institute. The Institute's liveliness was lost, and it now felt more like a military facility.

Meanwhile, the day after he took down Dante and returned to the Institute, Alus received a new report that the prisoners who had escaped from Trojan Prison had all been captured or eliminated.

After the battle, Alus had submitted the recovered Minerva to the military headquarters and given a simple report on the events before being released. The next day he'd received a bundle of reports including protocols, detailed reviews, and a compilation of the above-mentioned incident. But that was more or less how Alus's behind-the-scenes work looked. This kind of dirty work wasn't made public, and only a handful of people in the military were in the know. The truth was swept away into the dark river of state secrets.

Alus was currently living in a temporary residence, as his laboratory had been half destroyed. He sat down on a simple two-seat sofa and pulled over a similarly simple table to haphazardly put the reports on.

“I was worried about Lord Vizaist, but it seems that was unnecessary. It looks like the remnants of the escaped prisoners were taken down with minimal human casualties.”

The contents were plain, but the report attested to the current head of the Socalent family’s unparalleled information-gathering skills. What caught Alus’s eye was the report on the seemingly occult phenomenon of humans transforming into Fiends. The shocked students who had witnessed it had been given a strict gag order, but it was clear that wouldn’t be enough.

The official story was that the magic criminals had secretly brought Fiends into the Inner World. Regardless, an increased distrust in the military was inevitable, and the Alpha military had no choice but to announce that they’d sent out the rank 1 to quickly and thoroughly put an end to the situation.

Berwick still saw some criticism, but the other nations issued their own statements to back him up in order to conceal the mishap that had happened at the secret prison. Lilisha’s team had secretly dealt with the escaped prisoners who transformed into Human Fiends, but the phenomenon that Dante had spoken of had indeed happened in the Institute.

I suppose that is the bare minimum response. If it became known that humans were transformed into Fiends within the Inner World, there would be panic. The governor-general and all the nations were saved by the skin of their teeth. As expected of Lord Vizaist’s information control, Alus thought.

As for Vizaist...his daughter, Felinella, had been in a fight at the Institute against one of the key figures among the escaped prisoners, Mir Ostayka. The result had surprised even Alus: Felinella had disposed of Mir. Against a first-class criminal, she normally would have had her hands full simply escaping.

Alus would have liked to learn more, but he stopped reading whenever the report reached Felinella’s battle. It was hard to read. While the rest of Vizaist’s report was written in a matter-of-fact and intellectual tone, when it came to his daughter, it turned chaotic. Vizaist seemed torn between wanting to praise his daughter’s abilities and being ashamed about exposing his precious treasure to danger.

There was even a part where he wished a man strong enough to perfectly

protect his daughter would establish a sincere and trusting relationship with her, like a true doting parent. Alus read it like he was asking for the tomboy to be taken under his protection, which was frankly just a pain.

I'd prefer not to pry into that. But I should at least go check up on her soon.

Finally, Alus found a few handwritten pages of a memo that had been added to the report. They were from Governor-General Berwick and were about pending matters. First on the list was naturally the transformation into Human Fiends.

"Hmm...I agree that to look deeply into the Human Fiend transformation we'll need to look into that high-purity Ambrosia. Well, Aferka is on the move, so I don't need to touch on that. I have my own things to do, like preliminary investigations into the Four Books of Fegel."

It was in the nature of a researcher to feel a little uplifted by having a mystery to pursue. Alus glanced at the safe and inwardly put together his future plans. Finally he checked the last paragraph in Berwick's memo.

"The specifics aren't explicitly written, but does that mean that Lettie went to investigate the Trojan Prison?" he pondered. "Well, it was apparently built at the consensus of all the nations, but that is certainly a drastic decision, although the response will be fast thanks to it."

The instructions to investigate had reached Lettie as soon as the prison break had been discovered, but that meant that there'd been no political coordination between the nations. Although they had headed straight for the scene of the crime, Alpha wasn't allowed to break into the site on their own, so the mission had to be covert. Alus didn't think Lettie was well suited to the job, but it seemed to have paid off.

"Hmm. So there are signs that the auto-lock was cut and all cells were opened from the outside, huh?"

Alus knew that meant someone high up in the prison had directly assisted the breakout. The prison warden and vice-warden that Fanon and the others had mentioned immediately came to mind. While Alus didn't know their motives, it made sense if they were connected to Dante.

“And a suspicious corpse of a woman in a white gown...?”

Based on the clothes, a doctor, a scientist, or a researcher? Though it wouldn't make sense for anything but a doctor to be at the prison... They executed the provisional punishment there, didn't they? thought Alus.

The provisional punishment drained mana from prisoners. If the prison had carried that out, it would need large-scale equipment to store the drained mana. It wouldn't be strange for there to be personnel meant to maintain that.

Looking at the next description, Alus found a processed small half-burned photo instead of a detailed description. “Kwinska...head of the mana storage,” he read. The accompanying photocopy of the staff ID was very blurry.

“From the title, she seems to be an engineer, but she's probably a researcher with connections to behind-the-scenes work.”

To some degree, Alus could instinctively understand a researcher who put their own curiosity ahead of ethics or appearance. Naturally, no normal researcher would work at a secret prison in the first place.

Alus had no interest in the dead, but since it had been attached to the report, he knew Lettie had seen it as a suspicious death. But the information attached was limited and the only conclusions Alus could reach were forced inferences. Alus switched gears and forced all information into his brain.

Afterward, he followed the last instructions from Berwick and created a small flame to burn the reports. That was when a reserved voice called out to him from behind.

“Sir Alus, is your work done? I wanted to ask what I have to do for the right solution for this training.” Loki was meditating on top of a carpet with a magic formula drawn on it, and she had opened one eye to ask him this. This training method was somewhat experimental, but Alus believed that there would be an effect if it was continued long enough.

“What you have to do, huh? You sound quite uneasy for somebody who volunteered for this experiment,” he responded.

“Not at all! That's not it... I was just distracted by that and those documents.” Loki's panicked gaze drifted to a strange container by the wall.

It wasn't the vessel itself that caught her interest but the core inside, soaked in special liquid chemicals. In fact, the room was littered with other valuable materials and experimental items procured on the way back from the Outer World. They were all things that normally required strict inspection before being allowed to be brought into the Inner World. And the core was the very best of them all.

That said, Loki had had a bitter experience using a core as a catalyst against Alus in the past, so she wasn't in position to particularly comment on it.

"It's off the record, but I did get the governor-general's permission. I've brought back research material before too," Alus responded.

"Isn't that just because you were in the military?" asked Loki.

"Yes. Don't worry. I've already processed it so that it won't activate. I also got the governor-general to agree to a special reward for bringing back Minerva. It's a give-and-take."

Cores had minimal restrictions depending on their class. This core was B-class and only there because the Institute was currently on high alert. On the off chance that it did activate, it could be dealt with adequately at the moment.

"In light of me taking down Dante and to avoid further risk within the nation, the restrictions on my power have become a lot more lax," said Alus. "That said, I don't know how effective that core will be against you."



“Effective?” asked Loki.

“That’s still a secret. Well, feel free to take a break,” said Alus.

“Okay.” Loki obediently took him up on his words, and after stretching, she gulped down a glass of water and watched Alus.

“That’s right. There was another interesting report. Fanon Trooper supposedly engaged with those escaped prisoners within Alpha and flashily destroyed those new AWRs of theirs, scattering parts all over the place. The intelligence operative just happened to see their squad hurriedly collecting the parts.”

“You mean those AWRs stolen from Clevideet? They were called Barbaros and Caligula, right?” asked Loki.

“Yeah. Looks like they wrapped up their job too,” said Alus. “And they were able to get an accurate copy of one of the parts. But seeing as they’re reluctant to share any information with me, the top brass must be quite interested in it.”

Most gun-type AWRs of the past had been unable to escape the idea of shooting live ammunition, making them ineffective in battles against Fiends. In order to further evolve gun-type AWRs, bullets containing magic had to be created or there was no point using them against Fiends. That was where research had stopped, Alus recalled.

“Every bullet would have to be used properly, and they lacked versatility. Not to mention that each bullet had to be engraved with a magic formula, so there shouldn’t have been any nation researching them any further,” Alus explained. “Incidentally, there were also experiments with engraving the gun itself with magic formulas, but technical problems kept it from working. But this new type finally broke through that wall. Once the gun can overcome the hurdles, it could be used not just with magic bullets but also as an traditional antipersonnel weapon.”

“You did passionately take apart one of those guns from the campus festival after all, Sir Alus,” Loki suggestively said.

“Yeah, I have some interest in it too. It would be even more convenient to use if it could assist in casting magic alongside its use of magic bullets. If the

technical aspect has been overcome, it should be able to be mass-produced, but...”

“But?” Loki tilted her head.

“It’s a type of AWR we haven’t seen for quite a while. All the Magicmasters today are used to AWRs being long and conventional weapons. I wonder how many would be able to use it to a satisfying degree. And if Alpha were serious about pursuing Clevideet’s technology, they would need to start up a full-fledged project. But judging from the report, they didn’t get information on the most important part.”

Alus predicted that the top secret part was contained in the barrel of the gun. The ideal was to engrave a magic formula into both the magic bullet and the gun itself. And if it could be constructed so that the bullet could trace the barrel’s magic formula while it was being fired, that was all the better.

Alus definitely would have focused on the barrel. Although it seemed that the intelligence operative wasn’t able to copy that part.

“It seems Clevideet is rather advanced. To be honest, I thought that either Alpha, who has Sir Alus and some outstanding prodigies, or Rusalca with its comprehensive research and development enterprise were standing at the forefront when it came to AWR development,” said Loki.

Alus agreed with her assessment. Alpha had plenty of artisans that could make customized AWRs to order. Meanwhile, Rusalca had large AWR-making enterprises capable of mass production. Currently, Rusalca held half of the international AWR market.

“Clevideet is no doubt trailing when it comes to that field. Their ideas are mostly a bit different and their appearance rather eccentric. You saw what Fanon had, didn’t you? I’ve never seen an umbrella-type before.”

Indeed, Fanon’s AWR was rather astonishing. It was only Fanon’s own unique talent that allowed her to take full advantage of the umbrella and maximize the benefits of it being an umbrella-type AWR. Of course, Jean’s orb and Lettie’s rings were not exactly normal themselves. In fact, Singles as a whole seemed to have AWRs that stood out.

“Indeed. But in the end, the performance of the AWR isn’t as important as developing and refining the magic formulas, is it? Then Alpha has the biggest contributor!” Loki wasn’t actively trying to strain the interpretation to suit her own interest, but her attempt to excitedly praise Alus to the sky made him furrow his brow as he felt a little bashful.

Alus didn’t want to toot his own horn, but not too long ago, magic formulas had only been followed to a tee, not straying from their original purpose. He had changed that.

Researching magic formulas took patience and a lot of trial and error to see results.

That was why the best talent and most funds were usually allocated to that area. But Alus had researched magic formulas and developed a number of original methods of improvement all on his own.

His deep understanding of magic itself gave him an ability to think freely without being tied to existing concepts and to seek out the highest efficiency. He was also familiar with all sorts of magic regardless of attribute.

“Well, I do have some confidence in my contribution for the development of the attribute formula,” he said.

“You are too modest. Even with my new spell, Fire Ikazuchi, you are the only one who could modify a magic formula to such a degree, Sir Alus!”

So that was where she took the topic, Alus thought and smiled wryly. “Okay, okay. That’s enough. I am no match for you, who can use two vertices of thunder. You were able to properly restore a spell, so you deserve the praise.”

“Me?! Ha ha ha, please spare me, Sir Alus.” Loki shook her blushing, grinning face from side to side, holding her hands up as if to push away the excessive praise.

But Alus didn’t see it as flattery; very few Magicmasters could handle the eight vertices of thunder. Not only was finding the magic formulas difficult, Fire Ikazuchi was believed to be incomplete. If not for Loki’s suggestion to incorporate summoning magic, the restoration could have ended up as just an armchair theory.

Seeing as Alus hadn't been able to recall the related memories after glimpsing into the Akashic Records, developing and restoring the vertex was exceedingly difficult. At the very least, Loki was exceptional when it came to intuition in that field. Alus was satisfied with Fire Ikazuchi.

Exasperated by how Loki was blushing and fiddling, Alus put an end to the bizarre atmosphere with them both praising each other. "Well, if it becomes possible to mass-produce that gun-type AWR, there's a high possibility that the Magicmaster tactics will change completely."

Even as he said so, it wouldn't be clear what would happen until that future actually came to be. After all, it was equipment that Magicmasters entrusted their lives to, so there were plenty of hurdles to overcome, such as durability and versatility.

That said, once it was practical enough, the rest was up to preference. The more one masters their skills within a certain path, the better they become at expressing their ability with even crude tools. In fact, the form used didn't really matter as long as they were competent. Single AWRs clearly demonstrated as much.

"So it wouldn't be strange for there to appear more eccentrics and weirdos among more high-ranking Magicmasters," said Alus.

"Do you think so?" Loki's knife-type AWR was no exception, as she had several expensive AWRs, throwing and controlling them remotely, using them quite extravagantly.

"By the way, how many AWRs do you have, Loki?" he asked.

"I always have a hundred on me...and I regularly order more. Ah, I heard that you have an AWR workshop that you favor, so maybe I should order from there next time."

She was likely talking about Budna's workshop where Night Mist was made, but if she sent such a big order his way, he'd be liable to drop dead from overwork.

"Don't do it. Besides, you have a special master knife that's the linchpin of all of them, don't you? That's the only one you need to worry about, and you could

leave the military to mass-produce the rest. I can look over the maintenance for the master knife related to Fire Ikazuchi.”

“I understand,” she said. Still, ordering more knife-type AWRs regularly was anything but cheap. Loki must have earned quite a lot while she was in the military.

Alus began checking the magic formula for Fire Ikazuchi engraved on her AWR. As he did, Loki returned to her meditation training. With Loki in the corner of his eye, Alus read the data of the AWR through the analyzer. At the same time he listed things he would need to do.

Look into Minerva.

Research the Four Books of Fegel.

Investigate the Human Fiend transformation.

Train Tesfia and Alice.

Hmm, all this said, I have gotten some understanding of Minerva. It's the core of an ancient relic, and it seems like it's true that it's the progenitor of all AWRs. I'd like to study its unknown mechanisms some more, but I've already left it to the military headquarters. I wonder when I'll get to take a look at it next. Alus thought. The words Dante had left behind on Minerva left an impression on him. *Minerva...the moving fortress of God. Dante called it by quite the impressive name, but it must be a relic of ancient wisdom. I did tell Berwick, just in case.*

The authenticity of the information Alus provided could eventually be proven by the discovery of Minerva itself. The details were unknown, but its hidden location was somewhere in the Outer World...more accurately, somewhere close to where Alus had caught up to and fought Dante.

They only knew the general location, but Alpha was currently being rocked by multiple issues, namely Aferka's murder plot of Cicelnia, escaped prisoners, the attack on the Institute, and the Human Fiends that had appeared there. And while it was at risk of being forgotten due to all the recent events, there was still the Tenbram between the Fable family and the Womruina family.

If a major ancient relic were discovered now, the situation could spin out of

control. Knowing Berwick, Alus thought he likely wouldn't start on that until the time was right.

Still, an ancient relic. The Four Books of Fegel have passages mentioning similar existences. Magical relics, so called Artifacts.

Alus was already almost fully familiar with magic. Only a handful of experts could hope to surpass him in specific fields. Realizing that there was still more to learn made him somewhat happy.

But if Minerva had to be left for later, next on the list was the Four Books of Fegel. If he could research and understand them better, he might be able to understand something about his ultimate goal—himself, or rather his special ability. Special abilities were very different from the magic system in place. They were unexplainable to the modern study of magic, closer to the strange abilities from legends or fictional stories.

After inspecting Loki's AWR, Alus fiddled around with the knife, polishing it and continuing to think.

There were two remaining tasks.

He'd already decided on his policy for the third. His expertise as a researcher might have been requested, but that was about it. The heads of the seven nations would have to think on the matter.

When it came to humans turning into Fiends, the first example of the phenomenon that came to mind was Godma Barhong... Alus recalled the maddened look of the man he'd crossed paths with regarding Alice.

Regardless of whether the high-purity illegal drug Ambrosia was involved, it wasn't hard to imagine that the phenomenon was related to Godma's research. By following that path, one might not just be able to strengthen their body but also handle magic in its complete state.

However...the researcher had abandoned his reason and drowned in the extraordinary power. Alus, who had watched Godma's demise, felt an empty feeling wash over him. No matter how far he went in his research...he could never become someone else, and he was determined to walk down the endless path on his own.

Frankly...I'm not interested.

So Alus moved on to the next and final task. In his mind, it was the one he wanted to avoid the most, so he thought about it reluctantly.

“Honestly, I’m not really eager about it.” Looking over at Loki in the middle of her training, Alus let out a sigh. As far as he could tell, his hypothesis was proven. The exceedingly pure mana around her was staying within Loki’s body. He quietly stood behind Loki and crouched down to put his hand on her back.

“Let your consciousness gradually fade... Try not to think about anything. Turn your focus to the source of your mana. I’ll take you the rest of the way,” Alus said, and a black mist seemed to form around him before dispersing into the atmosphere.

Shortly thereafter—

“Hah?!” Loki, who had entered a trance for a while, jumped, opened her eyes wide, and looked around.

Alus slowly removed his hand from her back. “Let’s leave it at this. Now we know that it’s possible. And we could use some Nox Somnia Grass as an induction substitute.”

“What is that?” Loki asked and wiped away the sweat that had gathered on her chin as she looked over her shoulder.

“It’s the scientific name, after all. You know the analgesic used for treating trauma and other things.”

“Ah, so-called Bitter Dew Grass? But that only grows in the wild in the Outer World. It’s forbidden to bring it back into the Inner World, isn’t it?” asked Loki.

“Yeah. Nox Somnia Grass shouldn’t pose any problems if used for medical or research purposes, but it’s still treated as a prohibited species for any delivery. Even purified secretions have a strict permit system.”

“Maybe it’s a remnant of the former aversion to things from the Outer World? As for plants, I heard they sometimes show a bizarre growth rate.”

“There’s that, but they’re also a rare plant even in the Outer World. Not many grow in the wild,” said Alus.

“It would be a problem if the prohibition was lifted and too many of them were gathered at the same time, wouldn’t it?”

Alus nodded. In fact, Nox Somnia Grass was one of the herbs Magicmasters valued the most.

“Yeah. But it’s true that it’s effective, so I’m sure all the nations have been harvesting small amounts in secret. I should have grabbed some while I was at it too.”

Loki sighed. Seeing Alus not care about the prohibition, she exasperatedly looked around the room. There was far too much loot from the Outer World in the room, even with the governor-general’s permission.

“Well, I’ll do something about the grass, so don’t worry about it. So how’d your training go?” Alus asked.

Loki fell silent for a moment as she felt the mana inside of her body. When she did, the surprise made her eyes open wide, and she put her hand over her mouth. She wanted Alus to explain, but she didn’t even properly comprehend what had happened to her.

“S-Sir Alus...! I-Is this a temporary thing?!”

Alus grinned, shook his head, and answered. “No.”

“Then is this the method that you use? Is that why you have so much mana?” she asked.

“I haven’t used it. Like I said, it was an experiment. I was just researching a question that’s been on my mind. I gained some ‘knowledge,’ so I decided to try it out,” Alus said.

“I don’t mind being a test subject, but...” she started. Alus kept himself from retorting and carefully observed her.

“The circulation of my mana has certainly improved,” said Loki.

“It won’t work without limit. It seems it doesn’t even have any effect unless the user’s mana capacity and mana control have reached a certain level,” said Alus.

If mana was blood, it didn’t matter how much more was added unless the

blood vessels were long and thick, and stretched around the entire body.

“Do you mean that was why you always had me training my mana control?” Loki asked Alus, eyes sparkling in wonder.

But Alus gave her a curt answer. “You overestimate me. And, Loki, that is not as impressive as you think it is. Because the mana information becomes fixed upon maturation, it has next to no effect on Magicmasters who are fully grown. It may dramatically increase your potential as a Magicmaster, but there’s also a risk on top of the prerequisite. I figured that out earlier.”

“I-I see. But still, this discovery is—”

“Keep it a secret. I have no intention of teaching it to Tesfia and Alice,” Alus said.

“That’s... You are kidding, right?” Loki asked with a slight frown.

“No, I’m serious. Of course, that is only if they intend to stay on the level of a normal Magicmaster. It all depends on how far they want to go.”

Alus stopped talking and lightly shook his head as he started to clean up the test material. Loki swallowed her questions and helped him. The work got him thinking.

If they hadn’t gotten involved with him, they would have become full-fledged Magicmasters. They were rather excellent and could have followed the normal path of magic without deviating from a normal way of life.

But instead, Dante, a man more twisted than Fiends who was the embodiment of the irrationality and violence in the world had appeared. And the girls and the Institute had been caught up in the chaos of war.

The two girls had different personalities and qualities but were intelligent at heart. The reality that there is a world where being normal is far from enough had slammed into them with a storm of blood and violence.

Just like Alus had to become stronger in order to survive, they had been forced to realize that there are places they cannot reach by relying on a gentle breeze to push them along. It was a sight they wouldn’t normally have had to see while living life at the Institute. But a bloody wall had appeared before them

that they shouldn't have had to see.

"Who was it that told them that he would teach them how to fight in the Outer World...?" Alus asked with a sigh.

"Wouldn't that be you, Sir Alus? Still, the situation has changed. So I'm sure that starting tomorrow, a completely different world will be reflected in their eyes," answered Loki.

"I guess." Alus felt that a world had come to an end.

If so, the hesitation that crawled up to those two was sure to be troublesome. When one person guided another, the teacher role tended to follow their own rule of thumb. But how could one convey the type of cold that chilled to the bone to someone who had never experienced the harsh winters of the arctic circle. It was as impossible as teaching someone the fear of being hunted.

Despite knowing that, Alus resolved himself. While he claimed to be guiding the two novice Magicmasters, he hadn't noticed the sounds of two sets of footsteps approaching him from behind.

There are plenty of difficulties in store... Alus had thought similar things several times before, but the words had never felt as heavy as they did today.

Loki purposely called out to Alus in a cheerful and innocent way. "So how would you get your hands on that Nox Somnia Grass, Sir Alus?"

"Well, it's not like I don't have a lead. It's a plant that has a lot of effects, so there should be people researching it in secret in any nation. The fastest way would be to look up likely candidates."

"I see, then how about we go get some right away?" Loki acted calm, but the excitement was blatant on her face. Her red cheeks made it clear that she wanted to dash outside right now.

"Just so you know, it won't have much effect on you anymore, and try to remember that it's not some kind of training that anyone can do. One's vessel for mana is what's important," Alus said just in case, hoping to rein Loki in a little.

He couldn't help but worry about the future. But he still felt that the grass

was necessary, so he decided to head to the person who owed him the most. Leaving his temporary abode behind, Alus reached the half-destroyed main building.

Imposing-looking Magicmasters were still stationed there. There were also figures that looked like parts of surveying teams working behind areas cordoned off by yellow tape. Their numbers had been reduced, but Alus couldn't help but wonder how long this scene would continue.

The buildings still bore the scars of the attacks.

"I hope it can be fixed with some repair work," said Loki.

The training grounds had seen damage as well and looked like they would need even larger-scale repairs. Unfamiliar materials were brought into the facility where students used to engage in friendly competitions.

Military personnel gave Alus suspicious glances as he looked around. Yet when he looked back, they would drop their eyes and return a salute.

Alus's existence might no longer be a taboo subject, but there were still people who shrank from the eerie presence of the sixteen-year-old rank 1. And since he was always in the Outer World, there were still plenty of soldiers who didn't know what he looked like.

The treatment almost felt nostalgic to him.

Alus and Loki headed for the principal's office. Sisty's room had fortunately avoided any damage, so he didn't need to show any restraint as he knocked on the door.

"Hello, Principal," Alus gave his ordinary greeting.

Without even waiting for a reply, Alus and Loki stepped inside. Sisty had deep, dark bags under eyes and she resentfully glared at Alus with dull eyes.

"Alus...as you can see I have a lot to do," the principal said.

Alus wanted to ask her just who had brought back Minerva, an item she had failed to protect, but he knew that the students had been taken hostage. The decision to hand Minerva over to the attackers, even if only temporary, had been a painful one made with the resolve to accept all responsibility.

Sisty had been willing to give up her position and lose face to protect her students. In the end, there were students among the dead, but it was the bare minimum for the situation.

Alus smiled wryly and decided to just be mildly sarcastic. “Still, I’m quite tired after all this. It seems you are too. Would you like to brag about how tired you are?”

Glancing at her desk, he saw piles of papers spread across it. They interfered with the virtual screens, making it all seem rather inefficient.

“Ha ha... If you want an energy drink I have some over there,” Sisty said with a dry smile as she pointed to a corner of the room.

Like she said, there was a box of energy drinks stuffed into the corner. And upon closer inspection, Alus noticed empty containers scattered about in the corner as well.

“I haven’t slept for three days,” she said.

“I see even our excellent principal has weakened. That’s all the more convenient.” Alus grinned wickedly when Loki prodded him in the side with her elbow.

“Principal Sisty, you should ventilate this room a little. You wouldn’t want to ruin your body...” With a smile befitting a goddess, Loki opened the windows. “Your body is important. You’ll need to show more care. And I believe there is something you need to do first.”

Sisty turned her tired eyes to Loki and slumped down in her chair with a sigh. “That smile is scarier than Alus’s. What might that be, Ms. Loki?”

Instead of getting right to the point, Loki walked behind the principal and began massaging her shoulders.

To think, Loki was kissing ass. Alus had to wonder just what she was plotting as he watched the routine with cold eyes.

“Oh, your shoulders are very stiff,” said Loki.

“What? Well, I suppose. It has been so busy...really. Mmmm.”

Letting her shoulders get massaged, Sisty closed her eyes and relaxed. And

Loki didn't miss her opportunity.

"I can imagine. You are one of the most important people in Alpha, after all. You're a former Single with skills that are still able to put up a good fight against active-duty Magicmasters. Furthermore, you have beauty anyone would be envious of. What woman wouldn't dream of such beautiful skin?"

It was obvious flattery to Alus, but Sisty flashed the girl a big smile. "Oh my, I'm not that beautiful... You are very good, Ms. Loki. Your strength is just perfect."

Loki replied to Sisty's smile with a grin of her own. "It is an honor to hear you say that. I am under your care and guidance."

"Oh, you are one of my students now, there's no need to be so formal. Besides, it is my job to watch over my students."

An uncomfortably harmonious atmosphere filled the dark room. Alus began to wonder where Loki had picked up her hidden massage talent as well as the skill to curry favor with people of authority.

As Alus pondered that, Loki saw that the time had come and unconsciously allowed the smile of a predator to creep up to her lips. "By the way, Principal Sisty," she said.

"Yes, what might it be...ah!"

At the same time, Loki pushed a pressure point on Sisty's soldier and deepened her smile.

"It's about the repairs on the research building where Sir Alus's laboratory is. At present, it seems that the document submissions are still in limbo. I don't believe that the amazing principal of the great Second Magical Institute would put off thanking the biggest contributor to saving the day."

The atmosphere in the room shifted completely as Loki continued her assault on Sisty's pressure points.

"Ow, that hurts! D-Don't worry, Ms. Loki! Of course I am planning on prioritizing that. I mean it. Not there!" Sisty's face trembled like she'd been electrocuted, and she shouted, "D-Don't worry, Ms. Loki! I-I was just thinking

about the repair work! I'll handle it, right after this!"

"I see. I'm glad to hear it," Loki said, taking her hands off Sisty's shoulders and retreating back to Alus's side.

Sisty pushed the piles of paperwork aside and collapsed on her desk. With a weakened tone, she squeezed out a "Th-Thank you..."

Alus would've preferred to wait for more appropriate timing to ask Sisty to repay the favor. But in the end, the IOU card was used on something small, like repairing the research building.

Well, it was just a matter of priority so he left it at that. Besides, it was still hard to say that they were now even. It might have lost some effectiveness, but he should still be able to squeeze out a little more out of this card.

Alus made a rough estimate in his mind.

"Sorry it's not a bigger gesture, but thank you too, Alus." A little bit of life returned to Sisty's haggard face as she thanked Alus.

"It would be a problem for me too if you were to step down," said Alus. "There were casualties among the students too, but it seems you made it through by the skin of your teeth. That aside, I didn't see the hyena out today."

"Major General Morwald? With that flabby body of his, there's no way he would lead the field operations every day. I haven't seen him since the first day. And you're the one who managed to take back Minerva. Everyone is really grateful, you know," Sisty said.

"Well, you're welcome. Still, he's a crafty one. I can't imagine that he would let this opportunity slip by. He is probably plotting to pull an ally of Governor-General Berwick from her position," said Alus.

"I'm sure you already know, but the issue about responsibility for Minerva is being negotiated behind the scenes. Now I owe Berwick and Vizaist even more," said Sisty.

They're playing all sorts of cards here, including the crisis near Balmes, Fanon Trooper's illegal trespassing, Iblis's delayed response to the prison break from the Trojan Prison, and their friendly relations with Rusalca... They're even

getting Cicelnia involved.

Alus didn't know the details of the behind-the-scenes politics, but he could guess at the general outline. And there was one more thing, though Alus wasn't personally interested in it.

"And it's the Human Fiend transformation that will be essential in those negotiations?" he asked.

"Yes, that will probably be the biggest agenda in the next international conference." Sisty nodded with a wily smile.

"Well, even if it's kept hidden from the public, it would be dishonest not to share with the other nations. The groundwork would need to be laid and information fed out in bits to avoid attacks from Hydrange and other nations that Alpha has little connection to. As a result, the responsibility for Minerva appears to be small in comparison to the bigger issue at hand...or at least that's what they're attempting, isn't it? So not even Morwald can object to what's been decided between nations."

"Well done. That's a perfect answer," Sisty said with a broad smile.

Alus sighed and said, "So it's just a fixed game, then. But this is Morwald we're talking about. He's an old fool completely immersed in this kind of political theater and authoritarianism. He doesn't have the youthful grace to just step down, and he also seems to lack a good sense for when to pull out."

"That's true. When it comes to ties to Morwald, you are more problematic than I am. I only know that he's involved in the affair between the Fable family's Tesfia and the Womruina family's delinquent son," said Sisty.

"You mean the Tenbram. You mean he's going to interfere?" asked Alus.

"That old fool's main pillar of support is the old noble faction. He's particularly close to the Womruinas. They are in bed with each other. They'd need to be forced apart."

Even Alus was sick of Morwald. In addition to being top brass, he'd been interfering with Alus ever since he'd joined the military under Berwick's wing. He was not just Vizaist's political enemy who'd risen up to nobility through merit, but also Berwick's.

“Ah, that’s right, Alus. I have something interesting to tell you about one of the escaped prisoners who infiltrated the Institute, Mir Ostayka. Are you curious?” asked Sisty.

Mir was a magical criminal from the fourth layer, and Alus had heard that it had been Felinella to defeat her.

“From the sounds of it, she was the only one who infiltrated the Institute before the attack,” said Alus.

“...You’re not cute at all. That’s right. I actually got my hands on the letter of invitation that Mir had when she appeared at the Institute.”

“That’s bold for an escaped prisoner. And it was fake, wasn’t it?”

“That’s true, but there was a clue in it,” said Sisty. “The ink on this letter of introduction is a little special, you see. It seems to have come from the black market, but I found out where it originated. It comes from a special chemical factory that a certain noble, who shall remain unnamed, holds special interest in. The very same noble happened to own the abandoned villa that the escaped prisoners temporarily used as a hideout.”

“Oh, and what is that noble’s name?” asked Alus.

An evil grin appeared on Sisty’s face. “Womruina.”

That alone made all the pieces of the puzzle fall into place.

“I see. I guessed that someone inside of Alpha had helped the escaped prisoners. That would probably also be...?”

“Of course, the Womruinas are publicly denying it, and we have no clear evidence. On top of that, they’re nobles related to former royalty, so we can’t do any large-scale investigations. Even if they’re cornered, they could just sacrifice a butler or someone, claiming that they were using the prestige of the family for nefarious purposes. They also have so many shared interests and connections that shield them that it’s difficult for any investigation to reach them.”

Sisty seemed well informed of the situation, probably in large part thanks to the kind of behind-the-scenes information that put her in debt to Vizaist.

There was also plenty of information on the Womruina family's shady business coming in from Lilisha. Although there was no conclusive evidence, if they continued to slip up, their foothold might eventually crumble.

Alus thought seeing the former royalty fall from their privileged situation would be quite amusing. If they could use that to cancel the Tenbram, that'd be nice. Troublesome things going away by themselves was always welcome.

But things were unlikely to go that well, and Loki was quick to voice her concern. "That single faked letter of invitation is not good enough for evidence. As they're criminals, they might just have used stolen goods. Still, that's pretty naive for a seasoned criminal. Why didn't she dispose of the letter of introduction once she successfully infiltrated the Institute?"

"It must have been used to ensure that Womruina wouldn't betray them. Which is all the more likely if Mir was a hardcore magical criminal. Without any sense of morals of their own, they could never trust anyone else," said Alus, who had gotten some insight in how criminals acted in his battles against Kurama. He understood the minds of serious criminals far better than Sisty or Loki. "I think it's clear that the Womruina family has a connection to the escaped criminals. Even if they did, there's still no chance that Dante and Mir fully trusted Womruina. No experienced criminal would be that naive. Of course, Womruina would likewise be quick to cut them off as soon as their presence became detrimental to them. It's a relationship where both sides used each other."

"I see, that sounds like something villains would do," Loki said, nodding.

"I don't know what Dante's final goal was, but Mir might have been smarter about going about things. So if Womruina tried to cut them off, she would have a card to make them play to her tune instead. It would also be helpful if she were to get caught by Alpha. If she hinted at releasing that, she would have negotiation material with both Alpha and Womruina," said Alus.

Sisty let out a heavy sigh. "I think I understand. They live in a world where betrayal is normal, so it must be a habit."

"That's a good way to understand it," said Alus. "Well, it's not like I wanted to become familiar with how they think and behave."

“I would prefer not to know the circumstances of the underworld,” said Sisty with her face in her palm, looking melancholic. “I don’t have any intentions of poking my nose into that kind of business, but even the Inner World has gotten dangerous lately. Perhaps we’ve let too much poison build up in the shadow of all the peacefulness.”

“It’s a good thing you’re on Berwick’s side. Morwald and the others in the old regime are loaded on a sinking ship together with their corrupt practices. They can’t sail out to sea, so they’re stuck roaming a swamp until they sink of their own accord,” said Alus.

“Well said. But I haven’t clearly indicated what faction I am a part of.”

“I thought that you would be part of Governor-General Berwick’s faction, Principal,” Loki said in surprise.

But Sisty tilted her head. “Well, we’re kind of stuck together so that’s often how it looks. But as an educator, I want to stay neutral without pandering to either side. Well, I’m sure that Berwick is still better at leading the military though.”

Even though she had long ago left the world of political strife, Sisty was still unable to completely free herself from her past ties. Someone like Sisty, whose tales are almost legendary, was bound to have a fair share of hardships.

“I see. I suppose those are complex adult circumstances... It’s difficult to make everyone’s position clear. By the way, whose side do you think the ruler is on? Wouldn’t she be the most influential of them all?”

There was no clear answer to Loki’s question, as both Alus and Sisty had a scowl on their faces.

“She did appoint Berwick to governor-general, so she’s not against the current military administration,” said Sisty. “Moreover, in Alpha the ruler and the military are politically separated. The only authority that the ruler has over the military is to appoint and dismiss the governor-general. That’s why Cicelnia made such a dangerous gamble reforming Aferka into her personal forces.”

Sisty then looked to Alus as if to say that he was more knowledgeable about Cicelnia. He reluctantly opened his mouth. “Yeah. Cicelnia’s unlikely to oppose

Berwick. But she's both a prodigy and a natural calamity. For those who follow her, she is always like a cursed meteor that could plummet from the sky when you least expect it. That's why the wiser the noble, the more carefully they observe the ruler's moves. She's liable to get anyone involved, friend or foe."

Even Alus had been caught up in the Aferka business very recently. Cicelnia was a living goddess of beauty, with plenty of adherents, but at the same time, if a Lady Cicelnia Victim Club were made, it would probably fill up fast.

In a manner of speaking, the current supporters of the aristocracy were nothing but a bunch of fools clinging to titles that had become nothing more than decorations. They were just barely scraping by on what was left in the bottom of the barrel.

In particular, the way they coveted the authority to hire Magicmasters was not much different from ants swarming around a piece of candy. That was why the scum were so politically inclined. Political power and military strength were always equal, and very few rulers were as skilled as Cicelnia at manipulating the reins of both.

Hearing Alus's evaluation, Loki let out an exasperated sigh. "There's no end to Sir Alus's problems. What a troublesome ruler."

"You got that right! And now she's got Aferka as her pawns," said Sisty. "Jeez. Still, they were a big help with the Human Fiends that appeared in the Institute."

"Ah, you mean the escaped prisoners that transformed," said Loki. "If I recall, Aferka not only disposed of them in secret but is also looking into the suspected source, Ambrosia."

"Lady Cicelnia has finally gotten her hands on not just authority but military might. She's even got dirt on me," lamented Sisty. "I'm sure she'll demand something outrageous eventually using the carrot and stick. I'm getting a headache just thinking about it."

"Well, Lilisha is still attending the Institute. We can only hope that the close relationship between the educational and political worlds will give way for a rewarding future," Alus said, giving lip service.

As long as Cicelnia's attention was on herself, Sisty was probably safe from any disasters. And in the realm of close relationships, the give-and-take between Alus and Berwick had gone on for so long he couldn't keep count.

An inseparable relationship— No it goes beyond that by now... thought Alus.

That's just how it was. His relationship with the Witch before him was not too different either. It might not have been on the same level, but Alus wondered about his relationship with Tesfia, Alice, and Lilisha. Alus sank deeper into his thought before realizing it would be a quagmire.

He raised his head and called out to the still-troubled Sisty with an understanding voice, "Let's just leave it at that. It's a waste to think about it."

"You're right. It really is a waste," Sisty replied calmly.

But Alus's words weren't just for her; they were also for himself. There were things in the world that were pointless to think about. Especially those that concerned Cicelnia's intentions. Being able to give up thinking about things that would never lead to anything was another important lesson of life. Or at least that was how Alus decided to forcibly interpret it.

"Well, now that we've come this far, you'll need to protect your seat as principal no matter the cost. As reluctant as I might be, I'll lend you a hand," said Alus. "Cicelnia owes me too...probably."

"Couldn't you sound a little more reliable? No matter. Rather than hoping for help from the powers above, I'll quietly wait for the time of judgment while sorting through these piles of paper and bookshelves," Sisty said, sounding negligent. "Speaking of books, what happened to the Four Books of Fegel? There's also information about Minerva. Do you know anything, Alus?"

Sisty turned her curiosity as a Magicmaster directly at Alus.

He had known the question was coming. Alus snapped his fingers and set up a barrier to shut off sound. He was on guard for bugs, and it showed how important what he was about to say was.

"Regarding the Four Books of Fegel, I only know about one book. Simply put, it's not a prophetic book; it's filled with yet-unknown knowledge. It's more or less what I imagined."

“I knew it! So what’s written in it?!” Sisty’s exhaustion from these past few days was blown away as she excitedly leaned forward. Her excitement for it was probably due to her intellectual appetite for knowledge as a Magicmaster.

“I’ve only briefly analyzed the page on Minerva. I haven’t touched the other sections yet. And the information that can be read in the first place is transferred into the brain as an image, so you can’t carefully examine it as it’s impossible to take a picture let alone copy. Not only is it difficult to share between people, the information in one book is too fragmentary. It’s impossible to decipher all of it.”

Even with Alus’s knowledge, he could only decipher a portion of it. And even with all of humanity’s knowledge, only a few pages could be deciphered.

The Akashic Records will likely be the key to deciphering it. The knowledge within it goes far beyond what humanity has, Alus thought.

Alus continued to speak with Sisty, albeit somewhat fed up by her curiosity. “It’s still of interest to me, so I intend to thoroughly research it someday.”

“I see. That’s a shame. I at least wanted to know why Dante was after Minerva. He clearly had an objective in mind,” the principal said.

“I found out what it was. If you don’t mind hearing what I told Berwick, I could give you a summary.”

“Oh, now that makes me happy. You trust me as much as Berwick. And you’re right, there’s no adult around you that you can trust more than me. So you can count on me in the future too, you know.”

“If you’re being serious, I’m going home. Well, I scratch your back, you scratch mine. In exchange for the information, you’ll owe me a favor in the future, okay?”

“I-I know,” she said. “I’ll start by hearing one thing you have to say, if it’s something I can do.”

“One thing, huh? Fine, I’ll keep my expectations high. Minerva is supposedly the power source of an ancient structure called an Ark. Although I don’t know all the details.”

Sisty blinked repeatedly. “I see,” she said. She didn’t seem particularly surprised. Of course, she was neither a historian nor an archaeologist, so that couldn’t be helped.

“That would explain the massive energy hidden within it. But what was Dante planning to do with that?” she asked.

“If we take him at his word, he was planning to get his hands on that Ark and do something,” said Alus.

“So perhaps some fighting power to wage war on the seven nations?” Sisty asked, but something about that didn’t sit right with Alus.

There was that profound gesture Dante had shown at his death...his trembling finger hadn’t been pointed at the seven nations but in the opposite direction: the horizon of the Outer World.

Then there had been the peculiar magic Dante had used, which Alus had never seen. It had seemed similar to attribute-less magic, but to Alus it looked like he was controlling gravity itself. And Alus had gotten the distinct impression that magic was being enhanced beyond normal magic through the presence of Minerva.

Regardless, it was clear that Dante had touched the Four Books of Fegel and read their contents. And that was the third book, which was currently in Alus’s possession.

“Who knows. He certainly had the air of a violent combat junkie, but it felt like there was more to him than that. It didn’t seem like he had the resentment to just want to go to war, nor was he some mindless butcher. In short, I doubt it was that simple.”

Alus recalled Dante mentioning the qualifications to take a seat. Just what had he meant by that?

He’d been talking about them both being seat holders or something, that they both had the qualification. If that concerned a common point shared by both Dante and Alus, then...

It probably refers to someone who has read a portion of the Four Books of Fegel... That’s all I can figure out right now.

“Alus...?” Sisty’s puzzled voice brought Alus back to reality, and he shook his head once.

“We don’t know what Dante was after, so let’s put that to the side for now. It’d probably be best to leave the rest, like the Human Fiend transformation, to the military. Neither you nor I have the time for that,” said Alus.

“Phew, that’s true. Then story time is over. Now I need to get back to work, so you two better leave too.” Sisty tried to stand up, but Alus stopped her.

“Hold up. I almost forgot about why we came.”

“Oh come on... I already have enough on my plate.” Sisty had tried to avoid the topic by taking advantage of the unexpectedly long discussion, so now she frowned like a little girl.

“Principal, you haven’t forgotten about your promise have you?” asked the rank 1 Magicmaster.

“Ugh! Y-You’re using it already? Shouldn’t you save the right to make the Institute’s principal do one thing you want for a better moment? You’re young, so I’m sure there are nights when you’d want to feel the presence of an adult woman. I wouldn’t mind going on a dinner date.”

Sisty wiggled her hips to emphasize her voluptuous body, to which Loki spoke up with a stiff expression and cold smile. “That’s far too cheap, Principal. Even a hundred times wouldn’t be worth it to Sir Alus.”

“Huh, cheap... Are my womanly wiles really worth that little?”

Age aside, Sisty was a flawless beauty...and Loki’s strict judgment came as quite a shock to her. She looked down at her body with a serious expression and pondered if her skin was no longer as firm, among other things.

Without so much as a hint of sympathy, Alus quickly cut to the chase. “Sorry to interrupt your distress, but...please give me some Nox Somnia Grass.”

“Oh, what’s that? Why do you think I would have something like that?”

“Oh, you don’t have any?” he asked.

“Tsk...fine, yes I do have some. How did you know?” asked Sisty.

“It’s said that Nox Somnia Grass is not just good for your health but also contains components with cosmetic benefits. Knowing your interest in that field, I was certain you would be trying it.”

“Ahh, now you’ve gone and exposed my beauty maintenance trade secret. So how many roots do you want?”

“Roots? I only need the blade...” said Alus.

“Ah?! Pretend you didn’t hear that, then!”

Alus was fine as long as he got what he wanted. He had no interest in getting involved with something unnecessary. But Loki listened in closely.

Eternal youth was a concept that had captivated women since ancient times, and the closest to achieving it was Sisty Nexophia. Of course, her vast amounts of mana played an overwhelming part in that, so normal women couldn’t hope to get the same results—plus they would need more ingredients than just Nox Somnia Grass.

“Sir Alus, the principal is being generous, so let’s take the grass, roots and all,” said Loki.

“Hey, those are valuable! So I’ll let you have just the leaves... So do you want them dried out? Or some left as is? What will you be using them for?” asked Sisty.

“We’ll take some dried out in that case,” said Alus.

“So you’re using them for aroma, then? They do smell pretty good. How much do you need?”

“I’d like to burn it in my room, so could you give me enough to last for ten minutes in a smaller aroma lamp?” answered Alus.

“That’s fine. I’ve got a decent stock of leaves, so take some extra with you,” Sisty said and went into the room in the back of her study. She came back out with a large number of small bags. The bags were filled with white, dry grass that looked suspicious.

“I’m impressed you managed to bring that much in. You’re not selling it in secret, are you?” asked Alus.

“Of course not. It’s for personal use! So what are you going to burn it for? Did you finally wake up to your desires and plan to bring a girl over?”

Alus took the bags and investigated the grass. Once he was satisfied with its quality he answered. “Well, I’ll start with bringing over two. Although the goal will be training.”

Ninety-First Chapter

The Mysteries of Magic

After getting his hand on the Nox Somnia Grass, Alus left the main building and walked along the side of the half-destroyed research building. It wasn't at risk of collapsing, but repairing it would be challenging.

As he passed by, he glanced at his former laboratory. It had become far more ventilated and fully exposed to the outside, like a model room with the exterior wall removed.

"Sir Alus, there were several Magicmasters around the main building, and while they all seemed skilled, they didn't seem to be related to the military," noted Loki, who had been keeping her eyes open.

"Yeah, I saw a few high-ranking-looking Magicmasters and servants."

"Servants? So does that mean they're related to nobility?"

Students were currently on what was essentially a vacation, but there were some children of nobility that had stayed behind.

"Yeah, some overprotective parents must have hired bodyguards. I saw some non-Magicmasters too, but they're probably just there to look after them during the vacation."

"What a sheltered upbringing," Loki mused.

"Agreed. There's also members of the military here as security. Although only a minimal number of them, to avoid any unnecessary friction."

"Some of the noble children also have more bodyguards under the guise of being 'extra caretakers.'"

"Having a bunch of fierce-looking Magicmasters would make it seem more like a military than an Institute. While there's a limit to armed outsiders, the principal can't exactly reject them either. After all, some of the guards were

quickly killed and security was easily breached,” said Alus.

Loki found that hard to accept. “The attackers were all cruel but very skilled magical criminals. Not to mention that the Institute is not a military facility, so it was unexpected that they’d come here. It would have been hard to prevent that attack.”

“It was probably impossible. Mir and the weaker ones aside, even the principal in her prime would have struggled with Dante. Although that doesn’t matter to the public. The Institute is entrusted with the parents’ precious children, so they would naturally get emotional.”

Loki unhappily held her tongue. In the world, some things were just unavoidable no matter how much one tried. Not to mention that the escaped prisoners were on a completely different level from mere thugs. They were like an evil natural disaster. Like a storm.

Moreover, while teachers and security guards died in the attack, as well as two students, from an objective point of view, casualties had been kept to a minimum. From the principal’s point of view, not allowing even a single death would have been the best, but nothing could be done against the attackers who had escaped from the Trojan Prison.

Of course that didn’t matter to parents who lost their children. Society, and especially parents with children, wouldn’t be able to understand that.

Right now, Loki felt like she could sympathize with Tesfia.

Alus and Loki eventually reached the girls’ dorm. Their goal was to check up on Tesfia and Alice, since they hadn’t been showing up at Alus’s temporary residence. He assumed they probably hadn’t recovered yet.

The girls’ dorm had escaped damage from the attack, and the security system was as fortified as ever. A Triple Digit Magicmaster from the military was working as a gatekeeper and looking quite bored.

Perhaps the authentication system wasn’t working, but reception was being handled in a more analog way: names were being entered into a ledger and then checked against the Institute’s database.

Alus was checked particularly carefully, but that was to be expected.

Upon entering the girls' dorm, they were greeted by a sight quite similar to what they saw near the main building. Servants for the noble girls were coming and going through the hallways and were also stationed in front of doors.

There weren't that many of them, but the servants' outfits weren't something usually seen at the Institute, which created a strange atmosphere.

"Perhaps it's because of where we are, but it seems most of the servants are women," Loki said, indicating one of the servants who was pushing a silver wagon. The way she walked down the hallway was exactly what one might expect to see in a noble's mansion.

The girls who were gaping at them from a distance were probably girls from commoner backgrounds. The attack on the Institute had made the gap between noble and commoner more noticeable in the girls' dorm.

Alus disliked nobility, so he was uncomfortable, but that couldn't be helped. Tracing his memory he made his way to the door leading to Tesfia and Alice's room and knocked. However, there was no answer.

With the dorm security so strict, there was no need to be on alert, but a moment later, Loki ran out of patience and reached out to turn the doorknob.

"...Please wait a moment." A voice belonging neither to Tesfia nor Alice spoke up. As the door opened, Alus felt a strange pressure and pulled Loki back by her collar.

The sudden pull on her neck caused Loki to let out a small groan as a figure peeked through the gap in the door. An imposing housemaid stood there, blocking the view of anything past the door and staring sharply at Alus and Loki.

That tension emanating from her body told Alus that she was definitely not a normal person. She had an ominous presence that would evoke a sense of alert even in the peaceful girls' dorm. That presence was familiar to Alus.

"Ah...we've met before, haven't we? You're one of Selva's maids," he asked.

At the sound of his voice, the daintily clad maid stared at Alus. She was an expressionless woman, and she wasn't showing any hostility. However, she calmly examined Alus, like a battle machine analyzing her opponent's abilities.

The depths of her eyes were cold and stagnant as if a deep darkness was swirling within them.

A moment of silence was shared between them...before the edges of the woman's lips were awkwardly raised into something like a smile. As if she'd just recalled how to smile.

"...It has been a while, Sir Alus Reigin," the woman named Hest said in a horribly flat, inhuman voice that made one doubt the woman was really the one speaking.

Alus slightly furrowed his brow and noticed Loki at a loss for words in the corner of his eye. But the maid opened the door to invite the two in, bowing politely.

"Al, come in." From past her came a familiar voice. Loki let out a sigh of relief when Tesfia invited them in and stepped inside.

The room hadn't changed much since they last visited, but upon further investigation, there was another maid in the kitchen, doing the dishes. She hurriedly wiped off her hands and bowed deeply.

"It has been a while since you visited the Fable family mansion, Sir Alus. And I believe you are the young lady's classmate, Lady Loki. It is a pleasure to meet you. I am Lady Tesfia's maid, Minasha."

"It is a pleasure to meet you... I am Loki Leevahl." Loki returned the bow with one of her own.

Alice also joined in the greetings with a "Welcome in, Al and Loki dear." With that done, Tesfia came down from her bunk, scratching her cheek, and introduced the two maids.

"Uhm, my mother sent these two over. This is my personal maid, Minasha, and the...guard maid, Ms. Hest."

Minasha responded with a swift bow while Hest gave a dignified, yet mismatched bow with all the gravitas of a veteran mercenary. They both wore maid outfits, but if you asked a hundred people which one worked as a maid proper, they'd all get it right. The other certainly worked as an assassin or something.

Alus returned a plain introduction and felt his cheek twitch for the first time in a while. To think someone with this level of talent was a guard maid.

In the past, the Fable family mansion had been attacked by Aferka before its shift in leadership. And from what Alus had seen, this woman was a cut above the rest of the combat maids. That made sense, since the butler Selva had supposedly personally raised her as the most elite of elite fighters. She was a true powerhouse of the family.

When it comes to fighting people, she's probably above Loki. She's quite outstanding, thought Alus.

At present, he didn't know more than that she was equal to or better than Selva. Once Alus gave up and finished his assessment of her, the imposing aura that Hest had disappeared and her presence turned dramatically faint.

Perhaps that meant that they'd been acknowledged as safe visitors.

Meanwhile, Loki was following Minasha with something like admiration in her gaze. Alus guessed that she wanted to emulate the waiting style of a real maid.

"Why don't you help, Loki? It's a small room so you can hear the discussion from anywhere," he suggested.

"O-Okay...Ms. Minasha, please let me help. Also, is there something I need to watch out for when making tea?"

"Thank you very much!" After glancing at Tesfia, who nodded in affirmation, Minasha accepted Loki's offer with a bright smile. She looked like the very caring person who anyone would be fond of.

While Loki received a lecture on tea from Minasha, Hest bluntly stood at the wall by the door. She was technically a maid, but it seemed she had no interest in helping.

What a strange pair. But for some reason I can't put my finger on, it fits Tesfia so well. For now, Alus was just happy to finally see Tesfia and Alice face-to-face.

"Ever since Ms. Minasha came, I feel like I'm going to become a slacker." The first to break the silence was Alice. Alice had been in charge of the room before, but with Minasha's arrival, she'd lost all control.

“Your wounds still haven’t healed, have they? In that case, you should just stay under her care and rest up. It’s a vacation anyways, so you can’t use the training grounds,” said Alus.

“Huh, didn’t you hear? We got a message before that people can train at the practice block instead. You’re still lodging there, right, Al?” asked Tesfia.

“...Huh?” The unexpected information by Tesfia had taken Alus by surprise.

Considering possible places to train, the first thing that came to mind was right next to Alus’s room. But if inexperienced students would be practicing magic there, he wouldn’t be able to focus on his research, let alone leisurely read a book.

“What about the mana substitution system?!” he asked.

“It looks like there’s no need to worry about that. They’re using a device they’ve borrowed from the military to convert the damage, so it should function as a simplistic training grounds,” said Tesfia.

Alus wondered why they were always so fast when they didn’t need to be. However, he didn’t care how simplistic it was. Not only would it not block out the sound, it was also a matter of performance. It might not pose any problems with normal students, but what about excellent ones like Tesfia or Alice?

As if sensing his doubts, Tesfia continued, “But we still haven’t recovered, so we won’t be using it for a while. Even though they finally opened it up.”

“Yeah. I still haven’t gotten my grip strength back either... I wonder how long it’s going to take,” said Alice.

Unlike Tesfia, who was frowning, Alice smiled while holding her right palm over her left hand. There was a scar there from an attack she’d taken from one of the escaped prisoners. It was still wrapped around in a bandage, and whenever she recalled her inexperience, the scar ached.

She’d been through her initiation into real combat. And the experience had left a lingering shadow on her expression.

“I see. That’s a relief for now,” said Alus.

Tesfia wanted to retort and ask him what that was supposed to mean, but

Alus gave her a sharp glance. “Fia, I heard that you still can’t raise your arm. Are you okay?”

“What?! ... Y-Yeah, I broke my collarbone, and my hand still feels a little numb at times. But, I still have my life,” she answered, putting on a brave front.

The fierce battle with the escaped prisoners had left deep scars on the two girls’ minds. It wasn’t a battle against Fiends like Magicmasters were expected to fight, or even against Godma’s Dolls, but vicious humans. They had been in a battle to the death against opponents with a real intent to kill them.

The two of them lived a life that had nothing to do with death matches...

It must have been terrifying.

It must have been shocking.

“The malice of man is much more terrifying than Fiends, isn’t it?” Alus asked.

Tesfia looked like she wanted to say something out of reflex, but when she saw Alus’s expression, she closed her mouth. What Alus was about to say was something that could be considered meddling, but he had made up his mind.

These would be the first earnest words he’d said to them as their mentor. It was strange to realize, but up until now he’d only really been teaching the girls with a half-hearted resolve. He’d never left the realm of pretend teacher. But from now on, he would take responsibility and resolve himself to guide and teach these two novices.

“I came to ask you two something. I’ll need you to answer now,” he said.

He could see the two of them gulp. They were probably imagining him dissolving their current teacher-student relationship. Strictly speaking, there was no such relationship, but he wasn’t going to dwell on that now. He’d already taught them enough to cross that line.

“The escaped prisoners have all been killed or captured. But I think this incident was just a trigger. So far, common sense has been that Magicmasters only fight Fiends and that fighting people fits into a different category. But like you may have seen for yourself, humans transforming into Fiends might be a concern from now on, so I would say that the situation has changed.”

The toxin that had been gathering in the belly of humanity was starting to affect the entire body. Within the false peace, the evil poison one might call sin had been allowed to grow too large. Like Kurama, it was no longer possible to hide that the power of magic could be turned against not just Fiends but against fellow man as well.

Alus raised three fingers. “So, I’ve been thinking about what I should do with your teaching. Specifically, I have three different paths you can take.”

Tesfia and Alice audibly gulped.

“Naturally, because of the promise I have with the principal, I won’t abandon you halfway through. So the first option is to pretend that nothing happened, focusing on your peace of mind and focusing on the path of a normal Magicmaster who only needs to defeat Fiends. The nation’s likely going to cover up the Human Fiends as much as possible, so the majority of the students will follow the Institute’s established policy and graduate. Frankly, you two are talented and you’d achieve much this way.”

The two girls opened their eyes wide. This was the first time Alus had praised them without reserve.

While it pained him slightly to admit it, the two were already strong enough to make it in the Outer World, Tesfia in particular. They’d be able to handle any low-class Fiend alone. If anything, all they lacked was experience.

Alus then continued with the next path. “The second is to acknowledge the dangers your fellow humans pose and acquire the necessary power and resolve to kill them. It would be different from the military’s Magicmasters. I wouldn’t call it justice, but it would be the power necessary to protect order. In a sense, this would be similar to the Guardian Magicmasters of old. The abilities required will also change if you’re going to fight people.”

“You mean like Lilisha?” Tesfia managed to squeeze that name out.

She had probably noticed that the Fable family butler, Selva, had worked in the underworld. Moreover, Tesfia had taken down several of Godma’s Dolls, which were incredibly close to humans. Even if they weren’t aware of it, Tesfia and Alice must have felt the darkness within the seven nations.

“Something like that,” answered Alus. “Lilisha is mostly gathering information and working behind the scenes, so it’s not quite accurate. But you can consider the kind of thing Aferka does to be in that realm. Some of the secret missions that reach me are of that nature as well. Acquiring the skills to overwhelm people who make their living from killing and violence would be a difficult path.”

To do so, they would need to get stronger, but they would also need to learn the shortest procedure to kill a person. They would have to steel their hearts, so they would never waver or hesitate to kill. Alus didn’t say it out loud, but Hest was such a person.

But just like Lilisha, Tesfia and Alice’s suitability for shady work was questionable. So increasing their ranks while specializing against Magicmasters like the Guardian Magicmasters of old was a possible method with which they wouldn’t need to actively work behind the scenes like Alus or Lilisha.

Regardless, they would need to get used to killing people. And while they could cheat their conscience in the beginning since it would be villains, it would eventually become unbearable.

The two lightly sighed and looked at each other. Alus knew what that meant and lightly smiled.

“Well, I figured I’d suggest it at least. I don’t think you’re suited for it either. You could work in information like Felinella, but since fighting people would be the core of that too, it’d be more or less the same.”

“That’s true... Fia definitely wouldn’t be suited for it since she lets her emotions show so easily. Not that I’d want to see Fia like that,” said Alice.

“Ugh...!” Alice had hit the mark, causing Tesfia to wince and then scratch her cheek.

“But I don’t think I could do it either...” said Alice.

“I-I can do it when I have to!” Tesfia exclaimed, cheeks puffed up in a pout, but she eventually muttered in resignation. “But this time I was made painfully aware of how powerless I am. After being so reckless against those beasts, I ended up paying for it. If possible, I’d like to avoid that ever happening again.

Justice and emotion alone won't help against an overwhelming difference in power. And when things are impossible, nothing will change no matter what you do..." Tesfia said, lips trembling.

Upon hearing that, Alus closed his eyes. He could feel a chill in the pit of his stomach. Of all things, he was feeling a hint of disappointment. On the flip side, that meant he had expectations as well of this redhead in front of him, whose only strength until then had been her unyielding spirit.

"Do you regret it?" Alus asked as if it was someone else's words. He'd restrained himself to keep from sounding accusatory, and his voice was still surprisingly flat.

He'd felt it when he paid the two a visit. They had acted so that they wouldn't regret it, pushed forward by heartfelt impulses. They entrusted themselves to the righteousness in their hearts and stayed true to themselves.

They had gone past recklessness and into the territory of idiotic, but that was why Alus had felt a faint feeling of admiration. They had acted in the way of righteousness for the sake of all that was good in the world.

Alus had seen plenty of Magicmasters discard their lives for the sake of their comrades. At the time, he'd dismissed such behavior as the height of irrationality and looked down on it. No matter how much he thought about it, there was nothing logical about the decision. But the act contained something that Alus lacked.

To him, they were just a sequence of dead things inorganically growing. One after another, they stood up to resist something until they burned out, and even though it was a dog's death, deep down he couldn't despise them. He felt like there was something there that he had dismissed and easily left behind in the past. Something important that he was lacking.

Alus had constantly been looking after Tesfia and Alice, all the while grumbling and thinking it wasn't worth it. He felt like the two of them had a piece of the difficult puzzle that was humanity.

But once lost, one might never find it again. Even so, he wanted to know what he was missing. After all, it was something beautiful that he would never be able to understand no matter how much research he did.

Tesfia must have felt a hint of accusation in Alus's tone of voice because she shook her head, getting worked up and rebutted, "Of course not!!! I just hate not being able to oppose the overwhelming violence when people close to me are in danger! I hate standing up to protect someone but being unable to do anything! I never want to feel that helplessness ever...ah, ow!" She clutched her collarbone in pain.

"Al, we're okay! There might be a next time, but we won't fail the same way again. We'll get stronger, and next time we won't lose!" She didn't say it as fiercely as Tesfia, but Alice spoke with firm resolve.

It must have always been on their mind. They must have talked a lot about it.

There were always two sides to the world. Lately, it had been nothing but the cruel side, stained in grief and blood, but if possible he wanted to show them the beautiful side.

He was missing something himself and the only beauty he knew was the outside world. But he hoped he'd have a chance to show them a sliver of beauty.

"All right, I understand. Then I won't test you anymore," said Alus.

With their path decided, Alus realized he felt somewhat relieved. It was some strange parental feeling, hoping they would continue to walk as straight a path as possible. Once they were strong enough not to lose to anyone, they would be able to fight the way they wished no matter what battlefield they stood on.

He believed that they could one day become real Magicmasters, not heartless shams like himself.

Feeling like he wanted to run away, Alus's gaze dropped and he hung his head. Or rather, they were simply too bright to look at directly. Despite their defeat, the girls didn't get disheartened. Foolhardy justice remained in the world.

Alus recalled the words Selva had once said to him. He didn't want Tesfia to see the underbelly of the world. Now Alus felt like he could proudly tell that overly upright old man that there was nothing to worry about. On the path to becoming a Magicmaster, there might not be anything that she didn't need to

see.



Suddenly, a gentle voice called out to Alus. It belonged to Alice. “Al, we won’t lose. Not even to ourselves.”

“What?”

“Hmm, it’s not like I’m thinking about anything deep. I was just thinking that you might be worrying about it.” She giggled with a mischievous smile.

She’d unintentionally read into the subtleties of his heart, but in this moment, it didn’t feel so bad. They may have come at the spur of the moment, but they were quite kind words coming from Alice.

“She’s right. We won’t lose heart from something like that! Don’t underestimate us.”

Next, Alus felt a soft finger on his cheek. Looking to the side, he saw a smiling Tesfia with her index finger extended. It was her usual cheek and fearless smile.

“Here you go,” a happy voice said as a cup of steaming tea was gently put on the table.

Just the gesture and tone was enough to know Loki’s expression. She must have understood what he was thinking and naturally ended up smiling. So Alus didn’t let himself look at her face.

With his eyes cast down, Alus caught sight of Minasha in the corner of his eye, wearing a gentle smile as she put down cups in front of Tesfia and Alice. Steam rose from the cups and a refreshing, fruity aroma tickled his nostrils. Enveloped by that smell, Alus felt himself being watched over by a lot of people. There was nothing miserable about it.

“Al, what’s wrong? We still haven’t heard all paths. What about the third?” Tesfia urged Alus, looking somewhat pleased with herself.

At this point, it no longer felt aggravating. Above all, the details on the last path would fork depending on their decision. With their answer to the second path, they would surely find this path the most meaningful.

After taking a sip of hot tea, Alus spoke. “Are your two maids tight-lipped?”

“Huh? Well, I think it should be fine,” Tesfia said, glancing over at Minasha and Hest.

“That won’t be a problem from me.” Minasha put her hand over her chest.

Hest on the other hand tilted her head. “Unfortunately I can’t promise anything.”

Apparently she would need to tell Selva, Sithaima, or Frose anything she heard. Her inflexible answer made Alus hesitate.

“Then if asked about it, how about you only tell Lady Frose? That should still just barely be complying with your instructions. Moreover, it would be best if she heard the answer directly from the young lady,” suggested Minasha.

“What?! But that would just come back to me in the end,” Tesfia exclaimed in surprise, but her shoulders slumped at Alus’s urging gaze. “Okay, okay, I get it. Could you please do that then, Ms. Hest?”

“Understood,” Hest answered without changing her expression. It was like she was a puppet that could only give simple answers.

“With that settled, the third path...” Alus said, going back on the topic. “Simply put, I further enhance you. If you keep training as is, you will only ever fall within expectations. I thought that would be enough if you were aiming to become first-rate Magicmasters that adhere to the norm.”

“R-Really?! But thanks to you, my grades and abilities have improved tremendously, Al,” said Tesfia.

“Mine too! I even learned how to use a new spell!” exclaimed Alice.

Tesfia and Alice spoke in surprising unison, but Alus stopped them by quietly raising his hand. “You’ve already distinguished yourself with your training so far. But that is still only on the level of a student, and under the assumption that you’ll become Double Digits at best. You wouldn’t be able to aim beyond that as is, with your limits already in view. That’s what this new plan is for.”

“Hold up! By aiming beyond that, you don’t...” said Tesfia.

“Yeah, you mean Single Digit Magicmasters, right?” asked Alice.

As the two girls’ jaws dropped, Alus looked at them with a serious expression. “More or less. Slight as it might be, there is a possibility.”

Frankly, he didn’t really want to discuss the details. It would do nothing but

cause harm. These two were in the middle of growing their abilities, so if he held a carrot by the name of hope in front of them, it would only make them despair if they couldn't reach it.

“What?! We can become Singles?! Really?!” Tesfia leaned forward and peered into Alus's eyes as if trying to discern if he was lying. Alice also couldn't hide the sparkle in her eyes or the excitement turning her cheeks red.

But Alus spoke up to cut down on their expectations. “Don't be so rash. I'm just talking about the possibility. Do you know the reason Singles like the principal are called monsters?”

“Monsters? Doesn't that just mean that they're way stronger than a normal Magicmaster?” Although abstract, Tesfia was right.

As rank 1, it was easy for Alus to demonstrate what makes one a monster. “The fundamental difference between Doubles and Singles is simple...their amount of mana. In a sense, your natural talents, including your bloodline, determine it. No matter how talented or how much effort you put in, no matter how much you improve upon yourself, there's a limit to your potential amount of mana. You could say there is an insurmountable gap between rank 9 and 10. They're in a different league entirely.”

“Go on!” With unbridled excitement, Tesfia pressed her flushed face closer. Alice was likewise very enthusiastic, as could be seen from her clenched fists.

Alus put aside the discussion of whether the current rank 9 was worthy of being a Single. “On top of that, there is another gap between Singles of rank 3 and 4 and those below. I won't bore you with the details, but even Lettie at rank 7 has an extraordinary amount of mana compared with a normal Magicmaster's standards.”

Alus used to draw the line at below rank 3, but after a clash with Fanon Trooper, he revised it to rank 4. By Alus's understanding, based purely on amount of mana, those of rank 4 and above were the ones who could truly be called Singles.

But shockingly, Alus was even more extraordinary...the difference between him at rank 1 and rank 2 Vajet Olagram was worlds apart. Truth be told, Alus's mana had explosively increased since his battle with Demi Azure. If numerical

measurements could be made, even compared to his previous self, the difference would surely be two orders of magnitude more.

But it would be cruel to crush the two girls' hopes with that ruthless reality. So he kept quiet about that and continued.

"Since powerful magic consumes a lot of mana, it would take a lot of time to even attempt. Even more so when someone inexperienced and unable to optimize the spells tries their hand at it. And so, one's amount of mana can be a shackle that keeps them from learning magic. But when talking about Singles, mana is a large factor. Are you with me so far?" asked Alus.

Unfortunately, the more earnestly one tried to walk up the ranks, the more the cruel reality of the world hit them. It was questionable if a peerless genius desperately working for it could even reach rank 9. Attempting to reach even higher heights would have them face yet another tall wall.

When it came to Singles, the higher the ranking, the less often change happened. Since everyone was monster-class, few monsters would appear to change things up, so rankings rarely changed until the Magicmaster died.

"And then we get to you. Anyone with potential to become a Single would show results from the moment they enrolled in the Institute," said Alus. "Lettie is a graduate from here, but her talent should've been clear from the moment she started. It's not exactly the kind of talent you could hide even if you wanted. Next time you see her, you should ask the principal about Lettie's time in the Institute."

That was when Loki poked Alus's shoulder. "How strong was Lady Lettie back then?"

"Do you want to know? This is just my guess, but by mana amount alone, she had to have been on the level of a Double. Incidentally, between the two girls, Fia has the most, with the mana of a lower Triple. Alice's mana stands out too, compared to other students, but judging purely from the amount of mana, she wouldn't be of much use if she joined the military as is. She'd be a beginner who could handle herself a little."

"Aww, you don't have to bring me into it," the girl complained. Loki ignored Alice and waited for Alus to continue.

“Hmm? Well, Loki is the same as me, having gone through special training since childhood and then working in the Outer World. We began differently from the two of you starting out as students. But were you even interested in that kind of thing, Loki?”

“Yes, if it would be of help to Sir Alus, I thought having the power to bring fools to their knees wouldn’t be bad,” Loki enthusiastically said.

But Alus couldn’t approve of her motive. At present, the military and state stood above the people, but if she was careless, she’d only end up being used up by someone else. But he knew it was probably just something she’d said in the heat of the moment.

“Loki has a higher possibility of becoming a Single. There’s practically no Magicmasters that could master ultimate-level magic at her age. But she still lacks mana, so she’ll have to steadily increase it the normal way. Or rather, as my partner, I was going to have her pick up power on the level of a Single eventually.”

“I see, I see,” Loki said, clearing her throat. “I mean as Sir Alus’s partner it is only natural to set my aim high.” She spoke calmly, but she was very happy inside.

Of course Alus couldn’t bring himself to say that Singles weren’t all what they were cracked up to be. “We got off track, but going back to the third path. Simply put, I have a secret plan to increase your mana for the sake of reaching toward the peak that is a Single and considering the path of a Guardian Magicmaster. So what do you—?”

“We’ll do it!” The two immediately answered in unison before Alus even finished speaking.

“Hold on, I still haven’t talked about the risk involved. If you fail here, your lives as Magicmasters will end. Of course, you won’t actually die, but you won’t be able to use magic again. That’s how heavy the stakes are.”

This time, they were both at a loss for words.

“The decision is up to you. I put it nicely with the term ‘Guardian Magicmaster,’ but there’s a way of life for you without learning the skills to kill

people. You can still walk the path of a normal Magicmaster and forge a path with your talents and power. So think it through and...”

“I’ll do it!” said Tesfia.

“Me too!” agreed Alice.

The girls had no hesitation, their eyes filled with determination. They had complete trust in Alus.

“I see.”

Alus closed his eyes, and Loki whispered from his side, “Isn’t that enough, Sir Alus? It’s a little vexing, but their resolve is real. Also I want to take part in that secret plan.”

“You too, huh?”

“Yes. As your partner, I am equally resolved to become stronger. As you admitted, I might be able to reach it one day through training without overdoing it. But just by being by your side, I can feel how lacking in power I am. I never intended to take the safe route in the first place. Patiently waiting for ‘one day’ was never an option,” Loki bluntly said. “Besides, I don’t believe in a pipe dream like becoming stronger without risk. Even the strength you praise comes from losing everything once. It is all thanks to your presence in this world, Sir Alus.”

The silver-haired girl stared directly at Alus. “Besides, by the time you decided to tell the two of them, you must have already ruled out some of the risks. No, knowing you, there must be next to no risk anymore. I only need to believe in you, Sir Alus.”

Seeing Loki smile, Alus stopped trying to add any more. Loki had clearly read him from the start. While he’d called it a secret plan, it was close to a hidden trick. For that reason, Loki was half right and half wrong. Alus couldn’t put any guarantees because risk was always present.

“Then you listen in too, Loki,” he said with a sigh. “From here on out, it’ll be a bit of a tedious lesson.”

Tesfia looked confused, but she was still fully motivated. Alice also smiled and

readjusted her posture in her chair as Alus grimaced. The Institute might have seen mass destruction, but the atmosphere in this room was the same as it had been back then.

Alus sighed and looked up. Outside the window he could see the blue sky for the first time in a while. No matter what storm blew through, that blueness remained in the world.

He'd at least waited until teatime was over. Facing Tesfia, Alice, and Loki, Alus began explaining. It was a bit of a complex topic for them, but none of it could be omitted.

"Before explaining the hidden trick for increasing your mana reserves, I'll need to give you the basics," he said.

"G-Go ahead." The motivation from before seemed to have vanished as Tesfia gulped and her hand slightly trembled.

"That's the spirit. So do you know about mana territory?" asked Alus.

Tesfia stopped to think, but Alice beat her to the punch and timidly answered, "...Uhm, is that the area that mana can interfere with?"

"It's like you quoted it straight out of a textbook. No matter. Mana territory is the academic name for the space where mana can stay for a prolonged period of time. To put it simply, before magic can interfere with the world, mana territory will always appear first. You could say that the worlds temporarily overlap."

Alus wore an exasperated expression as he continued his lecture for the two confused-looking girls. "Loki using her mana sonar begins with perceiving the mana territory. Moreover, magic itself begins by acting in the mana territory before the phenomenon materializes. So all Magicmasters are unconsciously influencing mana territory."

"So it is like a subspace of mana particles or a different world?"

Alus nodded at Loki's interpretation. Academically speaking, there was a deeper meaning to it, but that was an easy example to understand when explaining it.

“Yes, it’s fine for you to understand it as that for now. The latest theory on the space is that there are multiple overlapping layers, specifically that there is an area that could be considered the deepest, innermost area. The technical term for it is the ‘mana depth.’ It is considered impossible to even observe because normal magic can’t affect it.”

“What...?! But if it can’t be observed, how can you be sure it even exists?” Alice asked with a puzzled look, and Tesfia nodded with her. If its existence couldn’t be proven, then in a sense it might as well not exist.

However, Alus didn’t doubt the existence of the mana depth. Generally speaking, there was no way to confirm its existence, but it was supporting evidence that could successfully explain various magical phenomena.

A Magicmaster on Alus’s level, who knew more of different magical theories and the depth of magic, could intuitively feel that it was correct. Specific means weren’t yet clear, but the same could be said for first-rate Spotters such as Exceles Lilyusem and Rinne Kimmel. Alus believed that, unconsciously or not, by touching the mana territory and at times the mana depth, they could exhibit their extraordinary powers.

“Think about this. Where is the mana that you use stored?” Alus asked.

“Where... Well, when using mana focus and the blood circulation is important, so inside the body?” asked Tesfia.

“Yeah, that’s what they teach in class,” said Alice.

Tesfia and Alice looked a little confused, but Alus continued. This kind of intellectual discussion always excited Alus. He was a magic researcher at heart; it was his natural disposition and there was nothing he could do about it.

“True. You can perceive the mana within you when casting. But I’m sure you’ve heard of Magicmasters going beyond their limit to draw on even more power to cast a spell, beyond what the mana in their bodies can support. Besides, going back to the concept of how much mana Singles have, how do you think it’s possible for us to see that when it’s typically invisible?” he asked.

Tesfia answered the question with a troubled expression. “Well, it can be measured with a machine, so I’m sure that gives you some sort of clue.”

“Yes, the concept of a mana vessel will be useful for that,” he responded.

“Yeah, and that vessel is where the mana is stored right? So even if there’s a limit like you said, we will have to train as hard as we can to make the vessel as large and wide as we can. And using up our mana on a daily basis will increase our amount of mana.”

Alice nodded in agreement while Loki kept quiet and just listened.

“Another textbook answer for you. Increasing your amount of mana depends on the size of your mana vessel. The amount of mana we are born with is the same as the size of that vessel.” Alus paused for a moment before moving on. “Then moving on to the main issue, what is the vessel? Say your heart is what produces mana. What would the vessel be?”

“Now that you mention it, where is it? Around the stomach?” asked Alice.

“Yes, I think it’s around there too for some reason,” said Loki.

Alus paused for emphasis. “The truth is that nobody knows. Equipment doesn’t mention the shape or size of a vessel. It visualizes and assesses the effect on real space in the form of a mana wave. The concept of the aura we can sense to detect the presence of other Magicmasters is similar to that. It’s just a difference of whether the approach is mechanical or a Magicmaster’s intuition.”

“What?!”

While Tesfia and Alice were shocked, Loki put her hand on her chin to carefully consider what she had just heard.

“That’s true, if there was a mana vessel inside the body, it would be easy to find if an autopsy was performed on a Magicmaster’s body.”

“A good conjecture. No matter how many Magicmasters you dissect, you won’t find any organ storing mana. And so the question goes back to square one. Where is the mana?” asked Alus.

“Is that what the mana territory is related to?”

Alus nodded at Loki’s question. “That’s correct. Everyone, Magicmasters and humans, have it. There must be a vessel in a subspace that overlaps the physical

body and mana territory both, which normally can't be seen or touched. So what do you think the shape of the vessel in that territory is?"

In response to Alus's clear enthusiasm, Tesfia and Alice answered sounding perplexed.

"Uhm...like a bucket?" guessed Tesfia.

"A cup maybe?" said Alice.

"Well, there's the expression of mana overflowing, so those aren't bad answers. What about you, Loki?"

"M-Me?! I imagine it's a sphere wrapped in a thin membrane."

"Oh, an interesting answer," the rank 1 Magicmaster said.

"What do you say, Sir Alus? I believe that the vessel is a metaphor," said Loki.

"The answer is...it's undefined. Mana territory and the mana depth exist in a dimension that's different from the real world. The concepts of distance, time, depth, length, and width don't apply, so the idea of a shape is nonsense."

"What? But that's unfair." Tesfia frowned.

Alus grinned at her. "But if you go through old tomes, that's not necessarily the answer. If a human gains some form of supernatural power and their brain forcibly tries to perceive the vessel's shape we get an answer."

Alus drew a circle in the air with his hand, dividing it with a horizontal line through the middle. "The vessel containing mana most likely looks like this, a crescent-shaped grail with a semispherical bottom. Relics and Lost Spells also have hieroglyphs that indicate a grail. In any case, if we take the image of overflowing from above into account, Alice's answer is the closest. Congratulations. Not that I have a prize for you."

Alus made a lighthearted remark before finally cutting to the heart of the matter.

"If my conjecture is correct, you can make this grail bigger. Meaning that you increase your amount of mana itself, rather than the connection to your vessel. But since that would mean forcibly expanding the grail, it will put a strain on you. If the grail were to be destroyed, you would lose the ability to store mana.

To explain the level of risk—it would be the worst possible outcome for a Magicmaster.”

“So we’ll need to go at it while feeling for the vessel’s limit?” Loki earnestly asked, no anxiety or fear present in her eyes. They couldn’t afford to be unclear about this.

“That’s right. It would be impossible to interfere with the vessel while it’s in the mana depth, but my theory is that if we use a special method of absorbing mana from the outside, it should work.”

And while he couldn’t explain it to the girls, doing so might be possible thanks to him partially using his special ability Gra Eater and his recently acquired Nox Somnia Grass.

On top of that, Alus’s power had changed from before. Having glimpsed into the Akashic Records and gleaned its knowledge, his chains as a Magicmaster had been removed and Alus had reached even greater heights.

His ability to manifest the complete Sword of Damocles in the battle against Dante was the proof of that. It was a compound phenomenon of his special ability and magic. Having gone through the experience of using it freely had deepened his understanding of his special ability.

Alus continued to explain to the three girls.

More specifically, in order for Alice and Tesfia to do it, they needed a space that was separate from their living space. It needed to be airtight and sterile and not allow any interference from the outside, not even sound from mana waves.

He’d experimented with Loki and felt that the success rate was not as low as he’d expected. Even so, an accident could cause everything to fall apart.

Once he had the girls’ approval, the rest was a matter of procedures. For the time being, they decided that the procedure would take place tomorrow. Alus would get the principal to reserve the entire practice block and forbid anyone else from entering for the duration.

Not only was this secret technique impossible for anyone but Alus, it wouldn’t be unheard of for nations to classify it as taboo. No amount of precaution was

too much. It was a frightening technique that would take time and effort, and if misused it could leave a talented Magicmaster crippled.

Maybe I didn't need to go this far for them, Alus thought and closed his eyes.

The girls had made their decision. He was only granting those who wished for it the power to stand up against the cruelty of the world.

And for him it would be a very interesting field to research. That being the case, the risk of touching on taboo wasn't much of a problem.

Naturally, failure is unacceptable. But with the power I have now, there's more than a 90 percent chance of success.

With an indescribable excitement, Alus opened and closed his hand as if to test his strength.

Ninety-Second Chapter

The World of Vessels

Alus decided to return to his temporary residence until the next day when they'd start. He stopped by the room in the practice block where Tesfia and the others would undergo the procedure.

It was isolated from the outside, and its walls and ceiling were as sturdy as the training grounds. Seeing that, he felt everything should be fine and returned to his own room.

His current temporary residence was even messier than his previous one because he'd thrown the equipment into his laboratory haphazardly, oppressing the living space. The bedding was shoved into a corner and the majority of the large room was filled with things unnecessary for daily life.

Regardless, Alus's steps were light. The stimulation he'd so greatly desired had come. When he returned to his room, he made his way directly to the safe, paying no mind to Loki sighing behind him.

The safe itself was old, but it was able to create a password using a license's configuration number, so it was reliable enough.

Uhm, where did I put my license... Right, there it is.

Alus picked up the license from his desk and held it up to the safe. A white lamp lit up to show that it was reading the license, then its color changed to green as it finished unlocking. He opened it and reached in to take out the volume of the Four Books of Fegel within.

"Huh?" he exclaimed in bewilderment, finding the item he was looking for gone.

"Loki! Did you open the safe?"

"No, I haven't touched it. Uhm, that is where you stored the part of the Four Books of Fegel, isn't it? Do you mean it's gone?!"

Alus nodded and put his palm on his forehead. He knew how strong the security of the safe was. It wouldn't open without his license, and since he needed it on a daily basis, he mostly carried it around with him.

Even now... No.

Hmm? I just picked it up from my desk. I should have been carrying it around with me...so why was it there? Ah!

Alus clicked his tongue and looked around. As he was unused to his temporary abode, it was difficult to notice any small changes, but...

"To think they got me...!"

At some point, his license had been swiped from him and his room trespassed into. And that scoundrel had probably taken the contents of the safe.

"Oh no, what should we do? If they're this skilled they must have easily slipped through the Institute's security screen. We should tear them to pieces when we find them!"

An exasperated voice came from the door as Loki shouted, "You shouldn't say such violent things."

A girl with blonde hair tied into a ponytail had appeared, though the familiar face had undergone a bit of an image change.

"I thought it was you, Lilisha," said Alus.

"What could I do? My job included getting it back. Besides, it was only temporary from the start. Nobody said that they were giving it to you!"

It'd be childish logic to say that nobody said they *weren't* giving it to him. But she was right, she had only handed one of the Four Books of Fegel to Alus. Perhaps it had only been a clue to find the escaped prisoners, but the ruler would never give anything for free.

Alus couldn't help but click his tongue that he'd overlooked something so basic. He shouldn't have kept it in the safe but rather somewhere nobody would ever find it. He was aghast with himself for getting so caught up in his intellectual curiosity that he'd neglected to take precautions.

But it was understandable in a way. The Four Books of Fegel were coveted by

aficionados, and Alus was no exception.

No, surely nobody craved flipping through those pages as much as he did.

So even if the ruler previously possessed it, Alus was so absorbed that he didn't even care. And having glimpsed into the book once he understood its immeasurable value.

"Damn it."

"Sir Alus, you've been dancing on top of the ruler's palm."

He hated to admit it, but Loki was right. With his part of the Four Books of Fegel back in the ruler's hands, the only way to get it back was to contribute to her cause. Although considering Cicelnia's underhanded tricks, he'd rather throw some verbal abuse her way than loyalty.

Alus forgot his usual calm and restraint and glared at Lilisha, making a veiled threat. "This sucks. So did you have nothing better to do than come to jeer at me? I see, then I'll take you up on it. It just so happens that you can hold mock battles in this building. So how bad of a headache do you want?"

"N-No, no way! Besides, aren't you embarrassed over using a cute girl like me to distract yourself?!" Lilisha vigorously shook her head in panic. She'd also been used, since she probably knew nothing about the Four Books of Fegel's contents.

"Damn, guess I don't have a choice. I won't be able to do anything against the ruler for the time being."

Naturally, since the ruler had gone through the effort of getting it back, she understood the value of the Four Books of Fegel. The knowledge within was far too attractive to let go.

While it was only one of four books, the knowledge within was far above what humans had accomplished.

For the time being, Alus contained his anger and, leaving the room, moved over to the testing ground. For some reason, Lilisha was tagging along too.

"What are you going to do? Heh heh heh, I'm a little curious about..." she said.

“Don’t be so annoying. It’s not exactly a stress relief. I just came up with something new. But if you like, I can try it on you first,” said Alus.

“What?! You’re joking, right? Right?” asked Lilisha.

“Don’t worry, you wouldn’t even suffice to test out new magic on.”

Alus visited the testing ground because he remembered what Tesfia had told him when Lilisha first showed up. If it could be used as a substitute for the training grounds, he might as well give it a try. Moreover, he found it necessary to test his new power before tomorrow.

The space was not well leveled, but it was a sports ground that could be moved around to a certain extent, although it looked a size smaller than the training grounds. Of course, there was no audience seating and the second floor was simply a passageway.

Thanks to the rush construction there was a set of familiar equipment and a control panel for the mana substitution system there. There were AWRs for loan from the training grounds in one corner.

“Sir Alus, what is this new spell?” asked Loki.

“Yeah, it’s a spell I designed in the past, but due to certain circumstances, I wasn’t able to use it.”

“And now you can use it? When did you train for that?”

“I didn’t train,” he said. “It would be more accurate to say that I’ve become able to use it after getting used to how to handle my special ability.”

Without changing into training clothes, Alus drew Night Mist from the sheath at his waist, its chain rattling. Lilisha and Loki stepped back.

“Are you going to show off a new spell? Then are you sure I should be watching this? I do technically report directly to the ruler,” Lilisha idly whispered to Loki.

It was unusual for her to directly speak to Loki. They were quite distant. Lilisha was closer with Tesfia.

Loki answered her with a harsh tone. “Well, I am Sir Alus’s partner, so you are privileged in a way. But since you struggle against even Ms. Tesfia, I don’t think

you have much to worry about.”

“Grr... You’re one to talk for someone younger than me! I’m trying to be frank here, so I would appreciate it if you weren’t so cruel to me!”

“Since Sir Alus hasn’t stopped you, I will follow his lead, but there will be no coming back from this.”

“I know, I owe Alus...and you too, of course. If Alus is so inclined, I won’t easily leak the secrets I see or hear.”

Winning over Lilisha, or rather dragging her in, wasn’t a bad idea. On top of saving her, by sharing secrets, she would become emotionally closer to Alus.

After thinking about that, Loki appreciated this series of events as a truly Alus-like approach or rather a way of showing his sincerity. They already had an inseparable tie, and in the coming Tenbram, her Frusevan family would play a role as a referee. So there wouldn’t be any problems with improving their inseparable relationship.

But as far as Loki was concerned, her usefulness to Alus was questionable. Having seemingly picked up on Loki’s thoughts, Lilisha gave her a glum look.

“What? I bet you think I’m not very useful! While it might be thanks to you two, I’m a little impressive too right now!”

“How much is a little?”

“I’m the commander of the new Aferka! With Aferka being reorganized, I practically have the most authority in the Frusevan family. I might not be the head of the family, but I’m the number one important figure in the Rimfuge family!”

“I see. So with Aferka serving the ruler with you as the top, the past power balance has collapsed. And the scales now greatly tip toward the ruler,” said Loki.

“That’s right.” Lilisha snorted in acknowledgment. “Rimfuge exists for Aferka. With my brother leaving the spotlight on the surface to me, it has brought us all together. Well, I guess we’re still being pushed around by the ruler.”

“So?”

“So I can be Alus’s backing,” said Lilisha. “Right now, your mast—partner is recklessly running around making enemies of nobles.”

“You have a point. But that is none of your business. The Socalent family is already backing Sir Alus.”

Lilisha’s eyes opened wide and she let out a heavy sigh. “The Socalent family members are treated as newcomers in high society. Lord Vizaist’s power is great, so everyone is keeping quiet, but the animosity among the old nobles is stronger than you think. Meanwhile, we have received the honor of becoming a unit directly under the ruler and finally coming out into the spotlight. Frankly, our prestige is making a comeback!”

The Frusevan family had been taking on shady work behind the scenes, so they had always been treated questionably, but according to Lilisha, it wouldn’t be long before she became well-known as the ruler’s close aide.

“Do you get it now?”

“Ah, what was that? I’m sorry. I was too focused on Sir Alus to hear what you said.” Loki’s blatant taunt did not sit well with Lilisha.

Lilisha turned her entire body to Loki, her face red from anger. “Like I said! As long as I’m here, the five families of Rimfuge will all support Alus!”

“...Sir Alus, we got her word on it.” Loki broke the good news to Alus, who was standing in the middle of the testing ground, and he answered with a simple thumbs-up.

Meanwhile, Lilisha stood dazed, realizing she’d just been played like a fiddle. “Huh?”

“Don’t give us that. You said it clearly. Well, we’ll at least need you to promise.”

Lilisha was speechless for a while, but she eventually covered her face with her hands. Once the red in her face faded, it was replaced with the sullen expression of a dog that had fallen into water.

“B-But just don’t ask to borrow a fortune or something right away, please. I just got this post, and our family has various expenses...and duties, so...well, it’s

fine.”

In a slightly serious tone, Loki worried over Alus’s current state, having left the military. “Money doesn’t matter. Just so you know, Sir Alus’s fortune rivals that of a major noble family. You just need to lend him your power. And also help to make our status clear in high society. I don’t know about Sir Alus, but I have some concerns.”

“Concerns, is it? But I don’t think so.” It went without saying that Lilisha had understood Loki’s thoughts.

Having been sent by Governor-General Berwick to observe him, Lilisha knew about Alus’s records and his surroundings, as well as most likely doing some research on his current situation.

“Nobody would risk being cruel to someone like Alus with his monstrous strength,” said Lilisha.

“No, there’s no guarantee for that,” Loki said, putting her hand over her chest. Sorrow stained her face.

Alus was stubborn and obstinate by nature. Even though he had his own worries and concerns, others only saw him as self-indulgent and not giving a damn about anyone. In fact, he didn’t even bow down to the authority of the ruler and refused to let anyone hold his reins, which was why Loki feared that one day Alus would be eliminated by Alpha. That one day those who were antagonistic or feared him would unite through chance, and that through international conditions, they would have the power to threaten even Berwick’s protection.

For starters, Alus was simply too irregular for the small human domain. His overwhelming power exceeded admiration; it earned him only fear.

“So I want as many as I can,” said Loki.

“Allies?” asked Lilisha.

“Yes, I suppose you could call them merry friends.”

Lilisha couldn’t believe what she was hearing, and her cheek twitched briefly. Noticing it, Loki couldn’t help but smile.

Indeed, allies were reassuring. Not superiors or subordinates, nor colleagues, nor those with shared interests. Tesfia and Alice, the current Lilisha and Felinella—she was sure that those merry friends, connected by something gentler, would one day become Alus’s strength.

“But honestly, there are quite a few people who would help Sir Alus when necessary. Powerful helpers.”

“I can imagine. He’s surprisingly kind.” Lilisha put a finger on her light-pink lips to think.

Seeing that, Loki spoke up. “Oh, that won’t be necessary. There are already enough candidates already.”

“As if!” Lilisha frowned, but Loki cleared her throat and adjusted her voice and attempted to copy Alus’s tone. “Sorry, you’re not my type. I’m not interested. You’re always complaining about everything and don’t know anything about discretion. Uhm, also...”

“I wasn’t confessing! Why are you trying to reject me? Also, that latter part was just bad-mouthing me!”

“I see, excuse me.” Lilisha’s shoulders relaxed after this silly exchange, and with a sigh, she looked over to the testing grounds. “Looks like preparations finished while we were talking. If anything, he’s looking over here instead of starting.”

“Let’s just shut our mouths,” said Loki.

Lilisha lightly waved her hand as a sign for Alus to begin, but he returned a cold stare.

“Ah...now he’s angry. It’s your fault, Ms. Lilisha,” said Loki.

“You’re wicked, you know that?” asked Lilisha.

Immediately after that...the two sensed the atmosphere had suddenly changed and fell silent, both looking at Alus. He was holding Night Mist in a reverse-grip.

An ominous black shadow flowed out from his body. It looked slightly different from the Gra Eater Loki had seen before; this lacked any grotesque

mouth. The flying, snakelike shape reminded her of the black mist with a will of its own she had seen in the Demi Azure battle. She found herself very worried.

«*Sword of Damocles*»

Alus quietly chanted the spell name, wrapping Night Mist in the black mist and extending the short sword's blade. The air shook, the ground cracked and warped, and a heavy sound filled the testing ground.

"Is that the dark element?!"

Lilisha's surprise was understandable. From its visuals alone, it could be categorized as the dark element. However, Alus shouldn't have been able to use the two elements...

"It's not. That said, I don't know what attribute it is," responded Loki.

The air was still trembling as if it was roaring. Even with the substitution system, the raging winds broke the tempered glass.

Despite the distance, a chill ran down the two girls' backs. They could instinctively feel that their lives were in Alus's hands...that they were in range of that long sword.

Alus took deep breaths and built up the spell by fumbling around. He was focusing intently, not overlooking even the slightest anomaly. That was just how aberrant the spell was. The pressure was on a different level from the ultimate magic that Loki knew of.

"Singles might be monsters, but this goes beyond even that!" Lilisha spat out with a smile to hide how shaken she was.

Her feelings were understandable. Over the past few months, Alus had grown tremendously. He had a wider variety of spells, and his mana stores were on a completely different level from before.

There was a pressure beyond anything she'd ever felt and Lilisha gritted her teeth. It wasn't the normal fear one might feel from bloodlust or tension. That would be within the realm of understanding.

This was something else. The amount of mana she felt was so vast her brain refused to understand it. If that power was turned on her, she might even

consider killing herself. She wouldn't even be able to beg for her life. Her only option would be to wordlessly surrender. The ridiculousness of the situation was so oppressive she couldn't help but smile.

«*Thousand Swords Obsidian*»

The testing ground warped as the two girls were assailed by even more pressure. It pushed Lilisha against the wall so hard that her back hurt, but she still couldn't look away.

The Sword of Damocles, covered in a dark shadow, was replicated one after another. Each of the lined-up black swords had amounts of mana that were out of this world. Lilisha wondered if this could even be called a spell.

"This is similar to the Oboro Hien that Sir Alus uses," said Loki.

"Is now really the time for that?! The substitution system has already stopped working and the building is collapsing!" exclaimed Lilisha.

"—?! Sir Alus!"

Once Loki sensed the danger and raised her voice, the swarm of black swords disappeared. Silence returned, but the building had been too damaged.

"I guess this is the limit," said Alus.

Surprisingly, Alus was sweating. When she noticed that, Loki realized that this spell required more than just vast amounts of mana.

Meanwhile, Alus, who'd finished sheathing Night Mist, seemed dissatisfied and lightly kicked the ground with his toes. One of his eyes was closed, its eyelid twitching slightly. Eventually, he exhaled and slowly opened his eye. Loki's sharp eyes saw a black murkiness in the white of his eye.

"H-Hey, if you're going to use a spell like that, say something first! This is bad!" yelled Lilisha.

"What is?" Alus answered, feigning ignorance. That prompted Lilisha to pinch the bridge of her nose and point at the testing ground as if to say that even an idiot could tell what was so bad.

"There are quite a lot of soldiers stationed around here! They're all going to come running at any moment."

Loki nodded in agreement, not even feeling the need to use her mana sonar. However, Alus showed no regard for any commotion as he looked around. “Hmm, the substitution system isn’t broken. It must have forcibly shut down after exceeding the upper limit.”

Alus hadn’t just confirmed that the equipment was working but also the absence of mana in the room. By incorporating Gra Eater into the spell, the room had been drained of mana.

He wanted to test tearing space as well, but he knew it would exceed Dimension Thrust, so it was hard to predict its effect. Since he planned to try the secret technique for increasing mana tomorrow, he decided to bear with it for today.

“Would you like to tell me what attribute that spell just now was?” asked Lilisha.

Alus hesitated a little at the question. Showing her was fine, but he wasn’t sure if he should explain the details.

But seeing how he had explained Lilisha’s new AWR—secret weapon Magdala—to Loki, it was only fair.

“...It’s attribute-less.”

“That’s way too sweeping! But I’ve never heard of it before. Attribute-less isn’t part of the existing magic classification, is it? So it’s a completely new field? Isn’t that amazing?” Lilisha muttered in amazement.

Alus responded with a smug smile, “I guess I can say that much. That’s exactly right. Besides, did you ever learn what attribute I belong to?”

“No, but is that what you’re the best at using, then?”

“Yeah. Since it’s inconvenient to not have a name for it, I’m calling it attribute-less.”

With his business done, Alus decided to return to his room. Loki followed Alus after turning off the lights and making sure that nobody was left inside the testing ground.

On the way back, Alus decided to give Lilisha a bit of a lecture. “I’ve already

done some research into it and my attribute-less magic has multiple classifications at different stages. The first stage is space-manipulation magic.”

“Hmm, I see... But wait? Don’t you manipulate space as part of using your magic?” asked Lilisha.

“Correct. You’ve done your research for someone who specializes in fighting people and not using much magic. But what I use does manipulate in order to use magic. I use the phenomenon that occurs as a result of the manipulation itself. In effect, I skip its purpose for the sake of the side-effect and expand and utilize that.”

“That’s very profound. But why don’t you make an official announcement? It’s a huge discovery.”

“It’s not the same as announcing a new spell. Since special abilities are involved, it’s best that fewer people know about it.”

“Hold on! What was that?” asked Lilisha.

“Only a few people know about it, that’s all. So do try to keep it a secret, oh commander of the new Aferka,” said Alus.

That caused Lilisha’s cheek to twitch. She groaned and came to a stop, but Loki nudged her back, causing her to walk again.

“Only Berwick and Lord Vizaist know. Well, I suppose someone perceptive might have noticed, but now that you know the secret, you will share their fate.”

Lilisha could only nod. Curiosity hadn’t killed the cat this time, but she felt like she’d been dropped waist-deep into a vast swamp.

“Yes, yes, thank you for sharing your secret. Well, I did follow you, so I won’t share it with anyone else.”

“Good, then let me continue. Going back to the categorization of attribute-less... Above space manipulation is space-command magic. Magic that warps space itself. Normal spells can’t compare to the level of spatial manipulation space command has.”

“Would that be what your Oboro Hien belongs to, Sir Alus?” Loki asked with

sparkling eyes, no less curious than Lilisha.

Alus had taught Alice about attribute-less magic before, but that was something of an introductory chapter. So Loki looked like an eager student begging for the teachings from a grand sage.

“Oboro Hien would be classified as space-manipulation magic. That said, it’s a combination of spells, so the overall degree of manipulation isn’t all that great,” answered Alus.

“Then what about that spell you just used?” This was what Loki truly wanted to know. The first question had simply been the lead-up.

That said, telling Loki and Lilisha about the classifications wouldn’t be of any use to them. At the present, Alice was the only one aside from Alus that could use attribute-less magic, but Alus was the only one who could actually formulate it as magic.

“That would be complete space-command magic...I suppose.” Alus muttered vaguely, a little unsure of his naming. For now that was what he’d decided to call the step above space-command magic, which was capable of having an enormous impact on space.

Whether he could confirm it through his experiments or not, the degree of rupture through the layers of space was decidedly different from the previous stage. After using Dimension Thrust, the rupture that was formed in space was automatically repaired. Meanwhile, the space rendered when he’d used the Sword of Damocles was so deep that the repair couldn’t keep up.

The tear was like a door that led to the other side of the world, an entrance to what might be called hell or the underworld. The forbidden scar hinted at far too great a danger.

Frankly, not even Alus knew the extent of damage it might cause when he first used it against Dante. It might even be mana territory or the mana depths peeking through, but even he couldn’t explain the abnormal experience.

Regardless, he had learned something new from this experience—that his special ability could be used as the source of power for the formula without running rampant. Through the interaction of magic, he had been able to elevate

the power to an unprecedented level.

This spell functioned differently from the six-element composite spell, Temple Fall, which traced space itself back to its origin. Instead the Sword of Damocles, as well as Thousand Swords Obsidian made possible through it, were literally sharpened blades.

This is supposed to be the magic I have the most aptitude with, and it drains this much mana.

Alus had no aptitude for anything aside from attribute-less spells. He was simply forcibly using them. As a result, he typically used more than twice the mana than someone with the aptitude for it, but he made up for his handicap through sheer amount of mana.

Even with his skilled mana control using his mana as efficiently as possible, not having an aptitude for the spells he used was a large obstacle. But the Sword of Damocles still used far more mana. It was hard to say that it was easy to handle.

Part of Gra Eater is being used in conjunction after all, and who knows if it might run rampant again. It would be best to limit its use to a short period of time.

But even limited, it was a very powerful spell and could certainly count as one of his trump cards. He would love to experiment with it more, but that wasn't easy with powerful spells.

Maybe I could get Fanon Trooper's assistance to try out the power. That's probably impossible, but there's still so much that's a mystery around this spell. Just analyzing the formula and its appearance isn't enough to tell what the risks are.

As Alus thought to himself, Lilisha called out from behind, "Hey, could you not just stop the conversation all of a sudden?"

Alus didn't have anything to say to her exasperated complaints. Giving her a bitter smile was all he could do. "Don't get full of yourself when you're the one being taught. I was considering my experiment."

"You are fine at that, Sir Alus! You're special after all!" said Loki.

“His habit of behaving so outrageous will never go away if you keep spoiling him,” said Lilisha. “If he grows up like this, it’ll be a disaster. And it’s Alus himself who will suffer for it.”

“You sound like his mother! That’s what we’d call none of your business!”

At some point, the discussion on attribute-less magic had derailed, replaced by two girls shouting at each other. But as they walked through the hall, Alus recalled he had something he needed to ask of Lilisha.

“Hey, Lilisha. Aferka was looking into the illegal drug, right? Ambrosia?”

“What? You want to make fun of me for showing up here despite that?” she asked.

“That’s not it. You’d figured out that Womruina was probably involved, right?”

“Yes, they’re the big shot behind the scenes. That said, I’ve left the investigation into the inner workings of the political system to someone else. I’m fully investigating everything related to Ambrosia.”

Surprisingly, there seemed to be another organization that could take over Aferka’s mission, and Alus had an idea of who that was. “Lord Vizaist, huh? A hard worker as always.”

Talk about being passionate about his work. Vizaist was at it even though his daughter had been hurt, even though he’d once used her having a fever as an excuse to leave early. But he might be burning for revenge.

If I recall, Felinella fought against Mir Ostayka. Considering the escaped prisoners, it was that Morwald who came to the Institute to investigate the attack on the Institute and the Human Fiend transformation. Why wasn’t it Lord Vizaist who came?

Perhaps the top brass were trying to keep inconvenient people away from an inconvenient scene.

They purposefully let the scandalous captain of the sinking ship go unchecked, thought Alus. Thinking about it, Berwick and Lord Vizaist wouldn’t let this chance slip them by... They let him come to the Institute. Knowing Morwald’s

personality, they knew he would personally come inspect the site himself. It's also obvious that he would use this chance to bring down Sisty.

Berwick had three figures known for supporting him and the military. Sisty and Vizaist were well-known for supporting him. As the head of the noble faction, Morwald, however, wouldn't overlook a possibility to kick out Sisty.

Alus's profound silence bothered Lilisha, and she spoke out with a hint of desperation. "Jeez, what do you want to hear? Just ask anything."

"Then let me be frank. How deeply involved is Morwald in this?"

Upon hearing that name, Lilisha smiled suspiciously. "What? So you already know that much. Well, there's no decisive proof, but I imagine he's in a panic because things are starting to look bad around him? He only came to investigate on the first day and hasn't shown since, right?"

"I see, so he's just trying to put out the fire."

"Yes, and Aferka is no longer enough. We're reaching our limits, and I think we're going back off. My brother is working pretty hard too."

Lilisha's older brother, Rayleigh, was a powerful person who'd led Aferka for many years.

But based on what she was saying, it seemed he was good at gathering information and investigating too. That said, he was also the ringleader of the rebellion against Cicelnia, making him untrustworthy.

Still, it seemed that he was at least sharing information with Lilisha.

"Lilisha, when looking into Ambrosia, did you investigate the Godma Barhong incident?" Alus asked.

"Of course, I got the information from Lord Socalent, but the background is still unknown. The details on the Element Factor Separation Project were destroyed after all. And that was your suggestion?"

Some foul research data and related information had remained, and when Alus heard that the top brass had displayed an interest in it, he'd suggested it be destroyed.

Lilisha probably wanted to find a connection to Ambrosia in that information.

Considering Godma's fate, it was likely that there was a link between Godma, the illegal drugs, and the Human Fiend transformation.

"Sorry, but you'll have to give up on that. I was preventing Alpha from rotting any further. This nation may be a magical superpower, but there's quite a few internal problems," said Alus.

"I know. And I think that the ruler wanted a unit reporting directly to her to correct that." Lilisha brought up Cicelnia, causing Alus to grimace.

"Don't glorify that vixen too much. I'm sure she has a different, good-for-nothing reason for it."

"Hmm, well I can tell that you wouldn't be very good with her. You're similar, after all."

"Don't be ridiculous," he said.

"Of course not," Lilisha said. "So you wanted to know about Morwald."

"Yeah, just tell me what you know right now. And leak any disadvantageous information on him to Sisty. In return, I'll give you information on the background of Ambrosia that might be useful."

"Oh, frankly, I kind of appreciate that."

"According to Dante, one of Kurama's executives, Mekfis, is involved."

Lilisha ruminated, imprinting the name into her brain. "Mekfis... That's the first time I've heard that name."

"I've fought with Kurama, but even among them, he's elusive. Getting a lead on him will take quite a bit of effort. You're probably better off finding out who's producing the Ambrosia," said Alus.

"So you do get it. Being able to fish out a Kurama executive would be nice, but even with all nations investigating them, they can't find anything. You'll never get to the core without a steady hand," agreed Lilisha.

"That's right, so you should look into the production site first. Also, don't fight directly against Kurama."

His sharp tone took Lilisha by surprise, and she nodded understandingly.

“Phew...thank you. Thanks to you, I think I will be able to give the governor-general a nice report.”

He'd almost forgotten about it, but Lilisha had a mission to observe Alus. He'd thought it was just for show, but she was actually making reports. “Try to make them indebted to you. Having the governor-general, the principal, and the other bigwigs owe you will be useful...maybe.”

“You don't sound very confident. But that aside, I think it's a little too late to let them know anything incriminating about Morwald.”

“Why is that?”

“You said it yourself. He's trying to put out the fires. A few days ago, someone attacked three old noble families. The very foundations were burned down, and there were no survivors,” said Lilisha.

“Nobles related to Morwald, huh. Did he sense that they were trying to betray him and move first?” asked Alus. “Even if they were trying to destroy the evidence, eradicating them is reckless.”

“Indeed. How many fires will be put out, I wonder. There's no proof, so we can only carefully supervise them, but it's only a matter of time before it becomes a major incident. They won't be able to silence the nobles.”

Morwald's foolishness was stunning, but it was a testament to the urgency of the situation. It was a very aggressive move under the circumstances. If he'd done that when Lord Vizaist was looking into his background, he'd have completely exposed himself.

“But not even Morwald has power rivaling the three great noble families. So where'd he get the forces to do something so reckless?” asked Alus.

“While it hasn't been made public, Morwald has a private army,” answered Lilisha. “According to my brother it's even more brutal than Aferka was. But he also said that it wasn't the clean work of professionals. They apparently kill everyone around the target. He's never met them, but he was certain they were from the underworld.”

“Things are getting more dangerous everywhere.”

“You can say that again. But Morwald has already crossed a line. I can’t wait to see where his rampage lands him,” Lilisha said, as if she was one to talk, having taken over the command of a shady organization herself.

“Still, this is strange.” Loki suddenly turned around and spoke in a puzzled manner.

Lilisha followed her lead a little later, tilting her head. “True. Nobody’s showing up even though Alus cast a spell on that level. The entire building should be buzzing with activity by now.”

The two girls were confused, but Alus paid them no mind and reached for the door leading to his room. “I don’t know who, but we have a meddling intruder on our hands.”

For some reason, the door was unlocked. Loki immediately slipped ahead of Alus and got ready to fight.

Despite their tension, a carefree voice came from beyond the door. “Sorry, but I’m helping myself to some tea. Hmm, so even instant tea has become a lot tastier lately.”

Alus’s eyes narrowed. A strange figure lounged in front of him as if the room belonged to them. He didn’t sense any hostility or mana from the person whose back was turned to him, but it wasn’t someone he knew either. He glanced at Loki and Lilisha, but neither had a clue either.

“...So you not only intrude but demand a warm reception too. Sorry to disturb you, but who might you be?” asked Alus.

“The room might have been messy, but trespassing is not something to be proud of,” Loki added, a warning in her voice prompting the figure to spin around in their chair.

Surprisingly...it was a woman. All Alus could tell was that her face looked a little haggard and that she was around thirty years old. She was a little taller than Lilisha. Her hair was crumpled and messy, as if it had been roughly pulled at.

Everything about her was plain except the dirty white gown she wore. One could guess that she was a researcher or technician.

“Sorry about that. I’m not exactly in a position where I can walk around with my head held high. Also, do you have a cigarette you can spare?”

“This is a no-smoking room! Who are you?!” demanded Loki.

The woman in the dirty white gown didn’t answer Loki’s question. Instead, she put down the cup of tea she was drinking and put her hand into her pocket out of habit.

“Oh my, to become useless after a single use.” She pulled out a strange small machine. She put it on top of her palm and the gem inserted into its center shattered into glowing fragments.

Alus quickly realized what that was. “A machine to keep mana from leaking outside, huh? What an interesting invention.”

“Does that mean that it was in effect and covered the testing ground too? If so, it would be because of her that it’s so quiet outside. But shouldn’t you be naming yourself rather than acting all nonchalant?” Lilisha calmly asked, prompting the woman to pleasantly smile.

“What a soft and refreshing voice. How long has it been since I last heard the voice of a young, innocent child?” The woman listened carefully as if listening to classical music, and with an ecstatic expression, she drank the remaining tea. “Very well, allow me to belatedly introduce myself. I am Kwinska, a seeker of divine truth. If that’s too hard to pronounce, you can call me the ‘Professor.’”

Kwinska was composed to the level of being audacious, and Loki quickly grabbed the nearest intercom to contact the guards.

“Hello! What is security doing?! Letting these unidentified people infiltrate, both yesterday and today...” Loki started to say, but she fell silent as professor Kwinska identified herself.

“If you’re interested in my identity, perhaps saying that I am a researcher from the Trojan Prison will suffice?”

Loki turned to look at Alus in surprise. Lilisha froze, and the sharp glint in Alus’s eyes grew stronger at her introduction.

“There’s no need to be so cutthroat. Why don’t we have a leisurely chat? Ah,

but there might not be enough chairs. You should prepare enough for sudden visitors,” said Kwinska.

“Being brazen doesn’t prove that you’re a guest that should be welcomed,” said Alus.

That said, it was an interesting visitor, causing Alus to raise a hand and stop Loki from reporting to the guards. Normally, he’d have thrown them to the guards without listening to what they had to say, but the Trojan name had caught his interest. According to the report on the Trojan Prison, she was supposed to be dead. According to Berwick’s report, there was only a single survivor from the Trojan Prison.

“That’s true. Even so, I believe you will accept my request, but everything has an order to it. I will leave my business to the end and first answer your questions, Alus,” said the mysterious researcher, Kwinska. “Just so you know, I was in charge of the mana storage in the prison. So I wasn’t a prisoner but rather personnel. That said, as someone working in a secret prison, I’m not someone that should be allowed to see the light of day.”

“Aside from the ones who cooperated in the escape, there shouldn’t have been any survivors among the staff. I heard that the prisoners killed them all, so how did you get to the Inner World?” asked Alus.

“Yes, well...to summarize it, I prepared a corpse and disguised it. I can’t confirm it here, but the Kwinska on the staff roster should be dead. After the prisoners escaped, I asked my collaborator to bring me here.”

“Who’s your collaborator?”

“I can’t tell you that. It’s not like I’m trying to mean, but they have their own circumstances to consider. I imagine that they will appear before you eventually. Although I don’t know if that will be as an enemy or ally.” While Kwinska couldn’t say, she’d answered immediately to show her sincerity.

“What’s the relation between you and the escaped prisoners?”

“Ha, like there’d be anything good between us. I was in charge of storing mana, but I also had another objective. Simply put, I was playing around with the prisoners’ bodies as part of my research. The disguised body that I left was

like a wreck, with its head split open.”

Alus’s temple twitched. She had just revealed herself as someone who had performed human experiments on the prisoners. A weak, self-deprecating smile appeared on Kwinska’s haggard face.

“Apologies, I’ve been there for so long I can’t distinguish between good and bad. But now that I’m back in the Inner World, I plan on restraining myself. There’s no need for that anymore.”

“I don’t know if that’s true, but...what were you researching?”

“Like I said before, I was looking for the divine truth, the clarification of the unknown. A clue for that is before me, which is why I’ve come, seat holder.”

“What is a seat holder?!” asked Alus, who had heard this term several times during his fragmented conversation with Dante that had left him with many questions. He hadn’t expected Kwinska to bring up the same thing.

Despite Alus’s sharp question, Kwinska didn’t answer immediately. Instead she glanced at the two girls standing at either side of Alus.

Loki was the first to react. “Sir Alus, is this okay for me to hear? If it is, please let me be present!”

“Hmm, I bet it would be classified information. I have no intentions of revealing it either, and like you said before, we’re all in this together!” said Lilisha.

Loki was one thing, but Lilisha was unreliable, although Alus had no intention of throwing her out now. Moreover, since he’d lost the Four Books of Fegel, which was the only clue he had for his special ability, he wanted as much information as possible. He still had a lot of questions about his discussion with Dante. He needed to confirm truths, and there was still an overwhelming amount he didn’t know.

Alus made his decision immediately and urged professor Kwinska on. “It’s fine, just start talking.”

“Hmm, I’m not one to be picky about respecting your elders, but lift me up at least a little. How am I supposed to get excited?” From her appearance, it was

hard to imagine her as excited, but she continued in an arrogant manner. “Also, can I get a refill? I want someone to pour it for me; I’ve spent a long time living in a hole, after all.”

Kwinska held out the empty cup to Lilisha. “Huh, me?! That’s fine, but don’t complain if it’s not good.”

“There should be coffee and black and green tea. But why Ms. Lilisha...” Loki had a complete grasp of the kitchen, and she grumbled at not being chosen.

“I just had black tea, so some green tea would be nice next,” said Kwinska.

“Ms. Lilisha, there are tea leaves stocked on that shelf. You’ll know it when you see it,” said Loki.

“G-Got it.” Lilisha took the cup and nervously walked into the kitchen as if it was her first time.

Kwinska called out to her back and said that she’d already boiled the water. It was rather impressive for someone forgotten by the world and trespassing in another person’s home to be able to be so brazen. Not even Alus was that unmanageable.

As she’d stained her hands with human experiments, she was as sinful as Godma. But she also seemed to be different from people who took a scalpel to people for their own greed. All in all, she was a strange and complex person.

“Well, maybe I should tell you why I appeared before you, Alus. Because you’ve glimpsed into the Akashic Records, haven’t you?”

Alus was taken aback.

Just looking at Alus’s reaction made Kwinska cackle in satisfaction.

“There’s nothing to be surprised about. I speak the divine truth of the Akashic Records themselves. Naturally, I’ve been on guard for people who’ve touched it. There’s a special mana wavelength released when a third party enters the divine truth...I even built a system to detect it in the Trojan Prison,” said Kwinska.

This professor might just have information that could be a massive clue to what Alus had been pursuing and researching for years. So Alus chose his next

words carefully.

“What I saw was in the Outer World, leagues away from the little hole you were in. You would have had to know ahead of time in order to detect the minute waves and warped space.”

Kwinska cackled, then spoke like someone who'd seen the abyss of the world. “Ha ha ha, distance is not a problem. The Akashic Records are a universal and all-transcending singularity. It doesn't matter where the person who accessed them is. We refer to those who have accessed and brought back a fragment of the Akashic Records a 'seat holder.'”

“Who's we?” asked Loki by reflex, but that was something Alus wanted to know as well. It sounded like a story that would overturn common sense, but the scale was too big and he couldn't bring himself to question the credibility of every single story.

“We are we...all the other seekers of truth. Incidentally, seat holders are roughly defined as those who have touched the Akashic Records. I'm not exactly one of them, but the Akashic Records themselves greatly fascinate me.”

Kwinska looked at Alus as if to appraise him. Her eyes had a suspicious glow that exuded the search for knowledge and the source of the world.

“So you came to me because I accessed it,” said Alus.

“Indeed. I'm satisfied as long as I can research. Fegel was only able to cram in a fraction of the other side of the world he had looked into, but it was still a revelation that could change the world. I want to go deeper, learn what lies beyond. You can understand me, can't you? I came here to sell you my knowledge and inquisitive mind,” Kwinska excitedly said and having finished her speech, slumped back in her chair, breathing roughly. “Phew, I got a little too excited for my age. Sorry, but I'll be taking a seat. I only have so much stamina, you see. If I could have a smoke...” Kwinska disappointingly bit her nail.

Alus figured her lack of energy was because of her poor lifestyle and her smoking, but he didn't say it out loud.

At that moment, Lilisha finally returned from the kitchen.

“Here is some green tea.” Lilisha clumsily placed the steaming cup on the

table in front of Kwinska.

“Sorry about that, little lady,” said Kwinska. She slowly brought the cup to her mouth and then closed her eyes as if to soak it in.

“Hmm! This is practically just hot water!” she exclaimed.

“Wh-What?” asked Lilisha.

“Ms. Lilisha, you skimped on the tea leaves, didn’t you? It’s pretty transparent... How embarrassing,” said Loki.

“How am I supposed to know the amount? I don’t want any complaints!” Lilisha raised her voice in a desperate protest at Loki’s dismissiveness.

However, Kwinska seemed to have given up and poured a second mouthful down her throat. “Well, hot water is fine too. So how far did I get again?”

Alus answered Kwinska. “To the point of me touching the Akashic Records. Still, I didn’t know that Fegel was a person’s name. But as I expected, it seemed the Four Books of Fegel were a copy of the Akashic Records.”

A long-standing mystery was starting to clear up in Alus’s mind. It was like a tangled mess was being unraveled and the sound of pieces of a puzzle clicking together.

“You didn’t even know that? I’m stunned. How did you even peek into the Akashic Records?”

“Through a spell a Fiend used. I touched it directly,” Alus answered directly, purposefully leaving part of it vague.

That had been back in Vanalis, when the Fiend Shem Azah had used a strange stake as a trigger for its spell Kehenage. Alus had touched it in an attempt to analyze the information within, but at the same moment, his consciousness had been disconnected from the spell construction, and instead a vast amount of knowledge had flowed into him.

“Oh, how interesting. As I thought, Fiends are the key. So it was true that they are one step ahead when it comes to that field,” Kwinska muttered and entered a world of her own. The way she did it seemed very similar to when Alus dove into his sea of thoughts, cutting away from the world and becoming immersed

in an isolated world.

“Hey, we’re still in the middle of talking. Talk about rude.” Alus snorted, but both Loki and Lilisha looked at him like he was one to talk.

“She’s just like you, Alus. That’s just the pot calling the kettle black,” Lilisha couldn’t keep herself from retorting, prompting Alus to furrow his brow.

“...Am I really this bad?” Looking at Kwinska at the moment gave Alus a good opportunity to self-reflect and see how disgraceful he sometimes appeared. “Fine.” He sighed and directed his question back at Kwinska. “Can you tell me a little more about seat holders?”

“Dante seemed to consider it just being able to read the Four Books of Fegel, but the truth is different. He probably never had the real qualifications. He’d only haphazardly touched on the truth of the world and only had half-assed knowledge. Without knowledge of the Akashic Records, it wouldn’t be strange if he confused the Four Books of Fegel for it.”

Dante not being a seat holder was unexpected but not particularly surprising to Alus. He hadn’t attached much importance to that position in the first place.

What Alus wanted was to explain the special ability within him and to satisfy his vigorous appetite for knowledge. Understanding in and of itself was what mattered, and if he happened to make a discovery in the process or contribute to humanity during it, it didn’t matter much to Alus.

At the very least, it would be enough for him if he could make a system where he wouldn’t be in the firing line for every little issue. But at the same time, he understood that ignorance of the world’s secrets was equivalent to perilous immaturity, which was why he couldn’t completely ignore the information from Kwinska.

Loki was one thing, but Lilisha also wasn’t very convinced. She wasn’t a magic specialist, and the only thing she was convinced of was that the Four Books of Fegel existed, as she’d personally handed one over to Alus.

“So what are the Akashic Records anyways?” Lilisha asked.

Alus had a general idea regarding this broad question; however, that was only because he’d personally experienced it. It wasn’t something he could easily

explain to a third party. It was a direct yet vague understanding, like figuring out what shape intangible mist had.

The root of the answer to that question surely lay in the existence of magic itself.

The magic traditionally used by Fiends was unraveled and reconstructed as theories verbalized in the human language. The seven nations had used that lifeline to survive against the attacks from the Fiends.

However, magic referred to mythical or fantastical phenomena. Originally, it would even deny attempts to create theories about it.

The powers that Magicmasters used could largely be split into two different things: one was the already theorized and explained magic, and the other was a completely different kind of irrational power—special abilities.

While similar, they were distinctly different, and the gulf between them could never be filled.

Magic eyes are a good example. It's considered just a special kind of magic, but not even renowned magic scholars have been able to identify it. And with so few samples, not much research can be made about them.

The research into the magic eyes special ability, as with the elements of light and darkness, was a questionable act of the past. When the inhumane human experiments of the past came into light, many of the research institutes were closed and their results destroyed. Supposedly, the military had even invested many soldiers into investigating it at the time. Any nation attempting to resurrect their program would face critique from all sides.

At any rate, pursuing the Akashic Records would likely lead back to those same dark practices.

While Alus's mind was spinning, Kwinska smiled at the fundamental question of what the Akashic Records were. It was the kind of nasty smile a world-weary, corrupt teacher would give their innocent and naive student.

"Perhaps it would be easier to call it the archives of the world. That said, it is a profound thing with countless names. However, I don't see it as supernatural. I believe it was purposefully created by someone."

“Huh? So you mean that thing, or concept, or whatever exists somewhere in the world? Well, if I could see it with my own eyes I could believe in it.”

“Lilisha, hang on. What did you just say?” asked Alus.

“What? I was saying that even if it was an object or a concept that supposedly exists, if it can’t be seen or grasped...”

The glint in Alus’s eyes sharpened once more. “So you noticed. Its existence is quite similar to the mana area.”

Kwinska’s murky eyes opened wide, threatening to pop out. Her face was distorted with joy, as if she’d finally reunited with a long-lost family member. “As I thought, your brain is amazing, Alus. It took me nearly thirty years of research for that to occur to me. Strictly speaking, there exists a dubious layer beneath the mana territory...”

“I call it the mana depths,” said Alus.

At that, Kwinska’s smile grew bigger and darker. “No, did you know there exists an even deeper depth? I believe that the Akashic Records make up a restrictive dimension that encompasses the mana area. That seems to lead to the depths of mana, the origin of magic, don’t you think? And here’s an interesting tidbit. The older records I have say that humans didn’t originally have mana. That much can be proven by examining our DNA.”

Lilisha was taken aback by that and retorted, “Hang on! Isn’t there a chance that all this is just a figment of everyone’s imagination? The DNA thing might just be a coincidence...”

“You sound like a foolish former student of mine. Well, with no evidence, it’s impossible to prove. I suppose it would be difficult for a child to understand. But Alus appears to be different at least,” Kwinska said and glanced over at Alus.

“I won’t deny it from the onset. It’s an interesting conjecture. And it’s true that there is a lot I don’t know about this topic.”

But Alus did stop to think.

I recall being able to decipher a Lost Spell I saw for the first time after reading

the Four Books of Fegel... But that knowledge can't be transcribed like the Four Books of Fegel. Well, it's not like I have to show these guys anyway.

That was because there was a special trigger to draw out the acquired knowledge. It was important knowledge, but it was currently impossible for Alus to freely express it.

Meanwhile, Kwinska pointed a finger at Lilisha. "But of course it's impossible to prove the existence of the Akashic Records, but I can point you to a portion of its blessings. It is something very clear and tangible."

"W-Well, what is it, then?" asked Lilisha.

"Babel," answered Kwinska.

The two girls were speechless, and even Alus's eyes widened. He wasn't as surprised as the girls, but he could feel his pulse speed up a little.

"But you are free to think it's a lie if you wish," Kwinska continued. "It would be pointless for an adult to get serious against a noisy child demanding proof of everything. The truth is that I haven't done anything but scratch the surface of the Akashic Records. So you can just dismiss what I have to say as the ramblings of a curious researcher."

This quieted Lilisha, but Alus couldn't dismiss it. "So Fegel made Babel?"

"Bingo, that's correct. And if you're asking for proof... Like I said before, I am old. Not to brag about my age, but I've been researching all my life. And I have far more knowledge than any old researcher you might know. As a bonus, let me tell you that my original body has long since decayed. Oh, but don't pry into what I mean by that. A woman has her secrets."

If what she said was true, it was surprising. While she wasn't young, she would pass for being in her thirties. At most, she looked somewhat older because of the lack of life in her eyes.

Elise from Kurama, who'd lived a long life as a side effect of her special ability was another, but Alus intuitively felt that the logic behind Kwinska's longevity was different.

After all, Kwinska had said that her body had decayed.

That said, since she'd told him not to pry, it would be boorish to pursue the matter any further.

With Alus in the corner of her eyes, Kwinska continued, "Fegel was a real person and a great scholar of the past. Having gleaned wisdom from the world, he couldn't keep himself from embodying that knowledge. That said, nobody knows what his true goal was for building Babel. Be it good or evil, or perhaps neither...nothing is clear."

Her words suggested that the tower of wisdom might not have been originally built for humanity. But there was no room for doubt that the Tower of Babel had contributed immensely to humanity. Without it, humanity couldn't live as it did now.

With that, Kwinska stopped talking to drink her hot water.

Not wanting to have her stay any longer than necessary, Alus brought the discussion back on topic. "That was certainly useful information. So what exactly do you want?"

"So abrupt... You don't know how to read the room, do you? Well simply put, I just want you to back my research. I want your funding and your cooperation. In return, I will give you what I learn from it, like the taste I just gave you."

Alus found it to be a perfectly acceptable deal.

Her personality and background were suspicious, but as a fellow researcher, he could understand her to some degree. And she'd just been working in the Trojan Prison.

She probably hadn't assisted in the prisoners' escape, and in a sense, she'd just lost her position and job due to an unforeseen incident. Fleeing to Alus showed she had no other choice.

Plainly put, she was a pitiful researcher who was struggling to make ends meet after years without seeing the light of day. Additionally, she was a victim of the prison break and already officially dead according to the records.

Even so, Alus didn't agree right away. Kwinska wasn't sure how to interpret that silence as she started to uncomfortably fidget.

“W-Well, I may have done some human experimentation, but hear me out. There were plenty of prisoners who wished for their own death because of the pain they were in. I simply had them cooperate a little with me in exchange for fulfilling their wish. Or maybe it was more than a little...”

It was clear that Kwinska had her back against the wall. And she was one of the few people who knew about the Akashic Records, perhaps the only one who could talk about that field as well or maybe even better than Alus.

“So how about it? I can understand not being able to make a decision, but I know I’m not the only one who wants to know more about the Akashic Records. At the very least, like the Four Books of Fegel, it’s hardly ever on the surface,” said Kwinska.

Alus’s eyebrows twitched. “Oh. So who else is looking into it? Tell me what you know.”

“From what I know, Kurama. And they won’t hesitate to use underhanded means; they might have an even deeper understanding than me.”

Alus nodded. The nearly immortal Elise had been a Kurama executive, and they surely had an interest in that sort of knowledge. Naturally, if they could, they would use it for themselves.

While Alus was thinking, Kwinska ran her finger around the rim of the cup. “When I first attempted to access the Akashic Records, it was through an experiment on a human. Previous cases of accessing it had been through humans as well. But I suspect that Kurama has a tendency of going through Fiends. And it might bear fruit immediately. In fact, based on what I’ve heard from you, going through Fiends might be a more effective approach. However, there is a meaningful old tome that says, ‘Fiends are the door; humans are the key.’ So there might be another method.”

Alus narrowed his eyes and ruminated on the words for a while. The recent Human Fiend transformation incident had been caused by the illegal drug Ambrosia, which the Kurama executive Mekfis may have been involved in. If Kurama was trying to access the Akashic Records through Fiends, things started to make sense.

But he didn’t have any proof. Alus pushed the conspiracy theory-like

speculations aside and got back on topic.

“Door, key... It does sound profound. If opening something is related to the Akashic Records, are those seat holders related as well?”

“I’ve tried to research the key myself, but got virtually no results. Maybe I should have researched the door through Fiends instead, but unfortunately I’m no Magicmaster. I couldn’t capture those ferocious Fiends.”

“And that’s why Kurama wouldn’t leave you be?”

“There’s still a chance that my appearance and name haven’t been revealed, since I feigned my death. Then again, they have sharp senses. If they find out and capture me, I suppose they will torture me or kill me to silence me. It’s an awful end either way; I’d rather avoid letting myself get killed in the prison only to get killed again. I don’t have many replacements,” Kwinska muttered, expression bitter as she imagined the scene she’d just described. “In any case, you don’t know anything that Kurama doesn’t already know. But if they could extract knowledge from the Akashic Records as they pleased, it would be a disaster, don’t you think?”

“I can agree with that. It’s not something I’d want to think about.”

“Well, I’m sure nothing good could come from anyone getting their hands on that. It’s in children’s natures to want to use a new toy they’ve gotten their hands on.” The knowledgeable woman displayed her disdain for all humanity.

And Alus nodded without hesitation. Kwinska said something that couldn’t be ignored, her voice full of resentment.

“By the way, they have the Four Books of Fegel. It’s only one or two at most, and they may just be transcripts, but they are probably working toward getting the rest.”

Alus looked at Kwinska’s murky eyes in surprise. To think he’d hear something like that.

By some twist of fate, they were after the same thing. And if that was true, then a clash between them was inevitable.

Regardless, he couldn’t let Kurama get their hands on the Four Books of Fegel

or Professor Kwinska. She'd managed to escape the Trojan Prison by faking her death and likely wouldn't be found so easily, but...

"Sir Alus, what are you going to do?" Loki whispered into his ear.

"That's obvious," Alus answered immediately and looked at Kwinska. "All right, I'll accept your demands. I'll cover all of your research funds from my pocket money, and I'll prepare a place for you to perform your research. But...I do have a condition. Nobody but me can know about your research. In return, I will keep quiet about you to the governor-general and ruler. There's no guarantee that someone hasn't slipped into the military or palace."

"That's fine with me. The most I can do aside from that is meddle in your young life. This was a worthwhile discussion. Also, thank you for the tea," Kwinska said and raised her empty cup up to Lilisha.

Seeing that, Alus seemed to remember Lilisha's presence. "Oh yeah, we've gotten quite far into our discussion, and this girl who's been standing here this whole time is the ruler's pawn, but you can trust her to be tight-lipped... Can't she?"

As he glanced at Lilisha, she nodded rapidly. Alus pulled out a small communications device and a scrap of paper, which he gave to Kwinska.

"For starters, here's a communications terminal and the PIN code to the account that will hold the funds you need for the time being. Stay low until I can prepare a space for you. By the way, how are you going to get out of here? I'm actually impressed you managed to get into the Institute."

"That much is simple. I can't use magic, but I do have some interesting devices to my name. This, for example, bends the light around me as an optical camouflage...but once you know the trick, there's not much else to it. And this sphere here contains the mana for passing through the sensors. Although, it broke when it suppressed your mana. It's a simple application of the military's substitution system. They're both prototypes I made a long time ago."

Kwinska tossed the sphere, which was now a piece of junk, into the trash. Loki, who was strict about separating trash, furrowed her brow, but Kwinska showed no interest.

I see, Alus thought to himself.

The Institute was currently under strict surveillance with the regard to the use of magic and any signs of mana. On the other hand, with their attention being so lopsidedly focused, there were unexpected loopholes that could be used. A non-Magicmaster unable to use magic or pose a threat to Magicmasters could go by unnoticed.

After seeing Kwinska leave as casually as Alice and Tesfia with her hunched back, Alus decided to give Lilisha a reminder.

“Lilisha, make sure you don’t say a word of what happened today to Berwick or Cicelnia.”

“I know! But I can assume that means that I’ve repaid my favor?”

“Whatever you want, I don’t really care about that. More importantly, make sure you’re careful around Cicelnia. She has a sharp nose and can pick up on secrets people don’t want her to know.”

“I am well aware. More importantly, you be careful too. The flow of money could expose you,” Lilisha noted.

“Yeah, I’ll keep that in mind. Don’t worry.”

Alus’s personal wealth was naturally in the top class among the Magicmasters of the seven nations. He would need to manipulate his account discreetly, but he had some degree of skill in that area.

He often bought expensive research equipment, precious materials, and jaw-droppingly expensive antique books in secret. Since he didn’t normally spend much money, he’d only learned the skills to avoid Berwick’s nitpicking.

“Phew, it’s been a long reception before the big day tomorrow. Still, there was a lot to gain.”

“If you say so, Sir Alus. I had my hands full just trying to keep up,” Loki said with a soft sigh.



The next day, Alus and Loki found themselves on the testing grounds. Since their temporary residence was in the same building, they could slowly stroll

over and still have time to spare.

It was morning and they had reserved it, so the testing grounds were empty. There was a fresh atmosphere in the air, as if everything from yesterday had been reset.

But there was no harm in being cautious. The procedure he would give Tesfia and Alice, a special training of sorts, was something that he couldn't allow anyone to interfere with.

First, Alus and Loki split up and checked the entrances. They naturally checked the locks and made sure to put no-entry signs on the doors.

But shortly after Tesfia and Alice arrived, a tired Lilisha showed up, rubbing her eyes. Alus hadn't told her the time, but since the girls all lived in the dorm, she might have asked the others directly. It was a secret training, but Lilisha had been present at the discussion with Professor Kwinska yesterday, so they were kind of inseparable at this point.

"Don't tell me you're planning on joining too?" he asked.

"What?" she asked with a yawn. "No, I'm sitting out today. You hadn't planned for it right? So can I join next time?"

Lilisha stared directly at Alus without looking at Tesfia. Seeing how she was brushing past her red-haired rival, Alus could tell this wasn't about a childish rivalry. Even though the method for increasing mana wouldn't show results immediately, she must have been interested enough to come watch.

Lilisha might have been his observer, but it wasn't his imagination that she'd been showing herself more often. She was present at important situations more often than not, so there was no need to brush her off now.

Plus the bodyguard/maid called Hest standing next to Tesfia was more of a concern. She appeared inflexible, and it was hard to predict how she would act if something happened.

"Don't worry, I told her off yesterday. Right, Hest?" said Tesfia.

"Yes, the young lady has made her decision, so there is nothing for me to decide. I will report to the family without going into details. The mistress has

told me to respect her daughter's decision if Sir Alus is involved," said Hest. That meant that the head of the Fable family had given her permission in a sense.

Hest's answer was composed, but her presence was confusing. Just because she wore a maid's uniform didn't mean she was a maid. Selva, who could read the room, would have been far more welcome.

Regardless, the method for increasing mana had some shady parts to it, so he could only hope that she wouldn't butt in. After going over the important points with Hest, he had her watch from the sidelines.

Tesfia and Alice were the day's stars and had come wearing sportswear. The two took off their jackets and nervously stood in front of Alus. Since it was training, they had brought their AWRs with them.

"That reminds me. I heard it was a detailed procedure, but I didn't hear what exactly is going to happen. So what are we going to do?"

Tesfia got the ball rolling. As one might expect from a girl, she was perfectly presentable, her red hair combed to a shine. She hadn't been good with mornings in the past, so this was a sign of growth—no, she must have had Minasha or Alice help out.

"It's basically the same as your mana-control training. There just happens to be a few special processes. I'll explain as we go, and I'll guide you to some extent. Before that, do you remember what I told you about mana area and vessels yesterday?"

"Y-Yeah..." said Tesfia with a wry smile.

"I remember," said Alice.

Alus casually responded, "Try to keep it together, Alice. You will be using tools, and there's a chance your mana might run out of control. So make sure you don't let your focus slip."

The two girls nodded at the same time.

"And, Lilisha, don't let any of your mana out, no matter what. If they fail, their mana vessels might break, and they might never be able to use magic again,"

said Alus.

“What?! Seriously? O-Okay, I’ll be careful,” said Lilisha. The risk was far greater than she’d thought, and she nodded seriously but was clearly relieved to not be joining in.

Alus left the two girls’ AWRs with Lilisha and got to work on preparations. He put down a large piece of cloth with a magic formula on it on the ground. Then he put an incense burner on top, which Loki put Nox Somnia Grass into and lit on fire.

Finally, she brought over a special, small square case. Alus took it from her and checked what was inside.

“All right. Everyone step back a little,” he said.

Everyone aside from Tesfia and Alice distanced themselves as Alus focused and unleashed Gra Eater. The black mist overflowing from his body gathered in his hand.

“Tesfia, Alice, sit down on the magic formula in a posture you can relax in.”

Alus swung his finger and dispersed the mist, momentarily enveloping the three in a dome.

When it soon disappeared, the magic formula activated. This time a translucent barrier covered the three of them. It was made to isolate mana both inside and outside.

Gra Eater gradually ate the mana inside to remove all mana from inside the barrier. With that, preparations were complete.

Smoke from the incense burner began pouring out, and the two girls took deep breaths and relaxed as instructed.

“This smell is kind of relaxing,” Alice said as Alus began explaining.

“It’s used for aroma therapy after all. The Nox Somnia Grass sharpens your senses, which helps you recognize the mana in your body. Whatever you do, don’t fall asleep.”

Alice, as well as Tesfia, who had slowly closed her eyes, answered with a soft “okay.”

For now, Tesfia and Alice would be the ones training. Loki and Lilisha watched from the edge of the testing ground, and Hest stood unmoving some distance away.

After confirming that they were far enough away, Alus started by walking behind the two seated girls. “Relax. Focus solely on the mana within you. Follow the flow like you do when you train your mana control. Follow it as it circulates your body.”

The girls’ consciousness faded away as they started to become one with their surroundings. No excess mana was expelled from their bodies as the mana circulated their bodies.

By inhaling some of the smoke, Alus was able to clearly sense his flow of mana. He could sense the countless pathways for mana reaching every nook and cranny.

They’re already at the point where they don’t need my guidance. They’re quick to adapt. Is this thanks to the Nox Somnia Grass too? Either way, it’s going well.

He welcomed the two girls reaching such a high level of mana control. By being able to grasp all mana within the body, it could be used more effectively. At this point, they’d be able to go into the Outer World without letting any mana go to waste.

There was still the matter of the time they could stay focused, but their skills were on the level of a skilled Magicmaster.

Gradually, Tesfia’s and Alice’s breathing slowed as their consciousness began to assimilate with their mana. They were skipping a few steps of mana control, but it was only possible because they were building off the basics. In any case, being able to do this naturally was a formidable talent.

“Don’t go too deep. Make sure you can still hear my voice,” said Alus.

If they focused so much on their mana control that they couldn’t even see their surroundings, they would be mistaking the means for the end. In the Outer World, they would have to keep command over their mana while fighting.

“Follow the flow of mana once more. Keep your eyes closed and slowly follow

my words,” Alus said, putting his hands on their backs to tether their consciousness to the outside world. “Recall the grail, the mana vessel from yesterday. You will follow your mana pathways and probably notice something off around your stomach. The path to the grail is there.”

“The mana depths from yesterday?” asked Tesfia.

“Hey, keep your mouth closed. Failure is not an option,” reprimanded Alus. Tesfia nodded in a panic and let her consciousness sink under again. “Once you get to the end of the path, look for the grail. I will insert a very minimal amount of mana as a signal to initiate you, so make sure you don’t miss it.”

What Gra Eater had ingested was something close to pure mana. Unlike the mana within humans, which contained information about the body, it was natural mana that stayed in the air.

Before the mana could be fully absorbed, Alus poured it into the two girls. The slightest glint of mana, smaller than a speck of dust, buried deep inside of them.

In this environment, I can keep track of the mana I’ve sent in. And with a marker, I can guide them if they were to lose sight of it.

When Alus did this, the two girls exhaled as the mana inside of them became uniform and strength left their bodies.

Hmm, looks like they found it, Alus thought. While they probably can’t clearly recognize it, they should be able to vaguely see mana gathering in one location.

Eventually, just as Alus had guessed, the two showed signs of having found their mana vessel. At this moment in their minds, they should be standing face-to-face with a giant grail with mana pouring in from above to fill it up. It was the final destination of their mana pathways: the mana vessel.

“From here on, we will forcibly expand the vessel. You will feel some pain; there is no point in this if we don’t push it to the point where the grail might break. Put your hands on the grail and let your consciousness pour into it, expanding your image of it. Keep it from overflowing. Listen, just because it’s a grail doesn’t mean that its shape is fixed like one made out of metal. Under this specific situation, you can change the maximum stores depending on the

amount of mana.”

Alus removed his hands from them and opened the box he’d gotten from Loki: a core that had been prepared ahead of time glowed suspiciously. Inside it was pure mana that lacked any mana information that could be construed as noise like was found in human mana.

Alus crashed his mana into the core to stimulate it, and mana began pouring out from a slight crack. Alus needed to keep it from absorbing mana information so that it wouldn’t mix with the noise, so the girls could absorb pure mana.

Alus had Gra Eater devour the mana from the core and smoothly moved it to the two girls.

“Now I’m going to be pouring mana into your bodies, so endure it. If it seems like you’ll break, I’ll stop it from my end, so do your best.”

Pure mana poured from Alus’s hands into their bodies. The technique required precise control to ensure that he always poured in a suitable amount of mana. If he poured in too little, the girls wouldn’t be able to expand their vessel, and if it was too much their vessel might break. If the vessel broke, the uncontained mana would hurt their bodies.

By Alus’s standard, it was only a little, but after a few seconds, it exceeded the two girls’ total mana. Tesfia’s and Alice’s faces twisted in agony, and they began to sweat. Alus focused completely on making sure he didn’t pour in too much more mana than the maximum amount.

While Alus did his best, Tesfia and Alice were each terribly bewildered in their subconscious.

Tesfia found her vessel in a very mystical location. The world was black as the night sky, and glistening water ran down to the mana vessel, which took the form of a grail. But at that pace, it would take days to fill the vessel.

It wasn’t overflowing, but there wasn’t exactly an increase in volume either. She wondered if maybe there was a hole somewhere. While the scenery was more felt than seen, as an image of the mind, it came from Tesfia herself, so it was probably the correct form.

Right now, Tesfia was in a state similar to lucid dreaming.

Her mind was calm and rational to a degree, but the distinction between reality and illusion was blurred and distances and size was vague. However, the occasional echo of a voice that struck her body told her what she needed to do.

After hearing the voice, the glistening water began pouring down as if the tap had burst. It disturbed the surface of water in the grail, and the water began to gush out. Immediately, she felt painful pressure.

What a waste... That's right, I need to expand it...

Tesfia understood what she needed to do. The torrent of water threatened to destroy the grail, and she felt a strong obligation to expand it.

Tesfia felt stabs of pain as cracks formed.

It needed to be wider, bigger. She was conscious, but as she was inside a dream, she could only wish and will it.



The grail slowly but surely grew bigger, obeying Tesfia's wish to contain as much glistening water as possible. But no matter how fast the transformation, the unending glistening water overflowed from the grail.

Ah, what a waste. I need to gather more. I can't let any of it spill, she thought.

Her wishes ruled this world, but she eventually reached a point where the pain became too intense. It felt like her body was splitting from her stomach, like her soul was tearing.

This is strange; the pain isn't receding. The glistening water is trying to destroy me.

However...just when the grail looked like it would break completely, the flow of water slowed dramatically, the pain receded, and eventually the amount of water coming down slowed to what it had been before.

"Fia, Fia!"

At the sound of that voice, Tesfia was finally able to wake up. The first thing she saw was Alice with a pale face.

"Are you okay? It doesn't hurt anywhere, does it?" asked Alice.

"Y-Yeah... Was it a success?" asked Tesfia.

"Right now, the blood coming from your mouth is more important..."

When Alice said that, Tesfia wiped her lips with her arm and found crimson smeared across it. She realized she tasted iron.

"Whoa?! What is this?"

Still seated, she looked over to Alus. The expression on his face was hard to describe. He looked neither happy nor relieved that it was a success nor did he look sad or disappointed that it had failed.

He was just staring without any expression on his face. At his feet were strange rocks that looked like shattered glass that had started to visually crumble away. It looked similar to the core of the Fiend she had defeated during the extracurricular lesson, which had disappeared after running out of power.

“Hey! This is a research facility. Get the hell out of here!”

From behind them, came a man’s rude voice. In it, one could hear the arrogance of someone convinced they were absolutely in the right.

Tesfia had no idea what was going on. Looking over at Alice, she found that the other girl, who weakly shook her head, was equally confused.

Just then, Tesfia felt a slight tremble in the ground. Heavy footsteps rang out as eight men in unfamiliar uniforms entered the testing ground, all looking angry and clearly with no intentions of suppressing the hostility they were exuding. So they probably wouldn’t listen to anything the girls or Alus had to say.

The entrance had been forced open with magic and lay crumpled on the ground. With a look of hostility, Loki stood in the way of the intruders. The man who looked to be the leader didn’t care and tried to push her petite body aside.

And in the next moment, his head was pulled back and slammed into the ground by Hest’s thin arms. Her maid uniform fluttered as she turned and gave the rest of the intruders a cold, murderous glare. She’d already taken out one; she was ready to take out the rest if necessary.

Alus had been somewhat concerned, but to think Hest would rampage here. Or perhaps she should be praised for moving to protect her master. Nobody had expected her to immediately start off using force.

Lilisha’s jaw had dropped and she had frozen by the severity of the situation. On the other hand, despite having been beaten to the punch, Alus’s expression was calm.

“Fia, Alice, your mana is still unstable. Start by using mana control to stabilize it. But don’t overdo it, just correct the flow,” Alus said. Then he spun around to face the entrance.

Realizing how bad of a state she was in, Tesfia hurried to stabilize her breathing. She didn’t know if she’d succeeded at the special training or not yet, but based on Alus’s attitude it didn’t seem like it had failed. But the mana inside of her felt more disordered than ever.

Likewise, Alice was next to her meditating and focusing on her mana. Her

eyes were closed as if she were trying to look away from the coming storm.

Alus clad himself in a slight amount of mana and, standing side by side with Hest, glared at the suspicious people he didn't know.

"Did you not see the No Entry signs? I suppose if you can't read, you're just trespassers who don't belong in this Institute," Alus said.

And in the next breath, he seemed to have disappeared and reappeared in front of the man in the lead. He moved his hand and touched the man's chest.

"Wha—?!" The man's body flew backward, and they all heard the dull snap of his collarbone when he slammed into the wall over the door and collapsed to the ground, unconscious.

"Th-The captain and even the vice captain?! A-Apprehend them!" the third in charge shouted, and the remaining intruders moved...but not before Hest put down another one.

When the man fell to his knees from her fist to his abdomen, Hest mercilessly kicked down on the back of his head. Seeing that, the remaining five pulled out their AWRs and readied their magic.

They appeared to be a squad with some Triples, but their response to an emergency was terribly sloppy. After all, even after witnessing Alus's and Hest's speed, they tried to cast large-scale spells that took time.

Alus immediately read the situation and targeted the intruder who would finish his spell first. As soon as he decided on his prey, Alus closed the distance to the young man in the back.

With Alus in front of him, the man panicked and swung up his newly cast Flame Blade, which clad his sword-type AWR in a bright red flame with black smoke rising from it.

"Huh?!"

However, Alus caught his sword in his hand. The burning blade couldn't even scorch Alus's hand, and with a single burst of mana, the Greatest Magicmaster extinguished the flames.

The rather high-level Flame Blade had been caught by hand. Before the shock

could even appear on the man's face, the sphere of space-manipulation magic around Alus's hand popped as it came into contact with the man's shoulder. The bones in his left shoulder cracked, and Alus kicked him away as he fainted in pain.

Beside him, Hest and Loki had joined the fray, silencing a few more intruders. It was clear Loki was quite accustomed to fighting people from how she was pinning down the opponent after making sure they let go of their AWRs.

Once it was all over, Alus turned to look at the man Hest had taken out first. Based on his appearance and the situation, he was likely the leader of these idiots. He appeared to be military, but he wore a uniform Alus had never seen before.

The expensive-looking clothes were dirtied by nose blood and vomit, making him look all the more pathetic, but that was the consequence for getting in the way of Tesfia's and Alice's training.

As an exasperated Alus looked away, he saw something preposterous.

"Stop, don't kill them!" he yelled.

Hest had seen the vice captain try to get up and easily lifted him by the head using one hand. She was about to stab him in the stomach using a metal claw she had equipped at some point.

Tsk, that's the same type as Lilisha's AWR, thought Alus.

Hest looked up at Alus's call, but after looking confused, she stabbed the claw about a centimeter into the man's stomach.

"I said stop... If you kill him, it's the family you serve who will get into trouble."

Alus alone could have done as he pleased. After all, it was the rank 1 Magicmaster against violent intruders. He could have used the fact that they were one-sidedly using magic as justification, and pushed through recklessly. And if they had been really serious about attacking, he could eliminate them without hesitation.

But it would be bad for a guard serving the Fable family to kill them directly.

For some reason, it appeared that the intruders belonged to a different nation's military. So it would definitely develop into an annoying incident, which would no doubt cause further problems for the Fable family, who were already dealing with the Tenbram.

“Those who threaten the young lady can not be allowed to live. They're soldiers, and they attacked first; it's only natural that they'd die in the counterattack.”

The way Hest said this without any expression gave Alus an instant headache. She was like a murderous doll with no intention to listen.

He'd had a creeping suspicion ever since he saw her, and as he'd expected, the training she'd received was more focused on killing than guarding. Just looking at that deadly looking claw-type AWR, it was almost definitely some sort of weapon meant for assassinations. It was the same as Lilisha's Magdala, but out of the six fingers, Hest likely had five of them.

Alus could only turn to Tesfia, but she was still focusing on stabilizing her mana.

“What kind of guard can't even be a little flexible? Whatever. If you want to kill him, go ahead, and in exchange the Fable family will have to solve its problems on its own. Just to make myself clear, you killing him will cause the most suffering for your beloved master.”

After a long moment, Hest said, “I understand. Then I will leave dealing with him to you.”

Hest pulled the claw out of his stomach and removed her hand from his neck, then returned to her original position as if nothing happened.

What a crazy guard. It made Alus question how Frose and Selva were disciplining her. Alus sighed and looked at the unconscious intruders. He decided he would extract information out of whichever one looked like he knew the most.

“Lilisha, who are these guys?” he asked.

With Hest, Alus, and Loki, there was no need for Lilisha to step in. Moreover, it was an unexpected happening, so she'd ended up being just an onlooker, but

she didn't neglect to make observations.

"Uhm, I think they are Magicmasters from Hydrange. That's where the uniform comes from."

"But why is another nation's military here?"

"Well, at an international conference two days ago, information on the Human Fiendification was shared," Lilisha responded. "So it might be related to that. It's a secret to the public, but all nations see this as very important. I heard all of them have sent out investigative teams, I guess... Aha ha ha."

Lilisha had probably come to tell Alus about that but forgotten all about it.

"I'm guessing not even the principal has heard about this. What a bolt from the blue."

Perhaps she'd learned about it just a few minutes ago, but as Alus thought that—

"Ahhh! Wh-Why did this happen?!"

—the person in question appeared on the scene and let out a scream of despair. Looking over, Alus could see an overworked Sisty standing by the entrance with her head in her hands.

Shortly after, Alpha soldiers appeared behind her as if to support her, allowing Sisty to finally look over.

"A-Alus...start by explaining what they did to deserve this," Sisty said, her face despondent, practically clinging to him for an explanation.

"Principal, I believe we were in agreement that nobody would be allowed in here today. So we took them to be more attackers trying to infiltrate the Institute. But don't worry, we've taken care of them, so I will leave the cleanup to you," Alus brazenly explained.

Meanwhile, Lilisha had run off somewhere, and Loki was smiling wryly. Hest was as expressionless as always, while Tesfia and Alice, who had finished stabilizing their mana, were aghast at the terrible state of their surroundings.

"Good work today. Now why don't the two of you return to your room... Come on, let's go, Ms. Hest," Loki said with a vague smile, trying to smooth

things over as she pulled Tesfia, Alice, and Hest along to return to their room. Alus tried to go after them.

However, Sisty grabbed a firm hold of his shoulder.

“Where are you going? Are you planning on pushing more work onto me? I’m going to die from overwork at this rate! Please tell me you haven’t killed them,” said Sisty with a heavy sigh.

“They might deserve to die, but they’re not actually dead. It’s their fault for getting in the way—worst-case scenario, Tesfia’s and Alice’s mana vessels could have broken.”

“Why are you bringing up vessels...? What were you doing here?”

“I’ll explain that later,” said Alus. “Still, I’ll leave the rest to you. Well, you can leave out my Single rank, but you can at least reveal that I’m part of Alpha’s military. That makes it a military versus military problem, and I can claim self-defense. As Hydrange soldiers, they should be held accountable for their actions in another nation.”

With a tired look, Sisty had the men behind her carry the men out.

“All right, then let’s roll with that,” she said. “Still, I see that the captain planned to investigate on his own. I just heard about it myself this morning, but apparently he was moving without the permission of the person in charge of the site. Once they arrived, they said a Spotter found the presence of a core and said something about a new case of Human Fiend transformations... Well, I’m glad that everything worked out.”

“That’s strange,” said Alus slowly. “If there was a core, Loki and I would notice.”

Alus knew exactly what they were talking about, but with the evidence already gone, he concluded that he just needed to stand tall.

“That’s true; this is my Institute, and we’ve already turned the place upside down. Hmm, it must have been some kind of misunderstanding. Really, what’s going on lately?” Sisty asked, dragging her feet to leave. Suddenly she turned around again. “Alus, I expect a proper explanation later.”

Suspecting he'd been found out, Alus straightened his back. "Of course. Good work today. I'm sure you have a lot on your hands, but please take care of yourself."

Alus's praise wouldn't even serve as a comfort since Sisty had a mountain of work only she could do. With that, Alus and Sisty had come to an agreement.

Alus bringing a core into the Inner World was a very serious offense under international law.

I'd already deactivated the core, though. Well, it's still too early to announce that research.

The circumstances were different from when Loki had brought one in. In the worst case, if they pursued him for this, Alus could just announce his research on deactivating cores.

A core was active when it was absorbing mana, but if it was stopped from acting as a Fiend's heart before then, there were no problems.

Interfering with the mana area and using Gra Eater to scoop up part of the core was all it took. Another method was to have it absorb a small amount of mana to locate the source of the core and use a special agent to deactivate. While it required a delicate technique it had already been verified.

But if it was announced, there was a risk that there would be large-scale research in the Inner World. With the risk removed from cores, they could obtain their mana, which would be a reassuring source of energy for humanity.

However, Alus felt that it would be premature to open Pandora's box now that the discussion on Human Fiend transformations were being held among the top.

I used a B-class core this time, but I wonder just how much you could get from an A-class core.

While it interested him, considering the risk of an A-class Fiend appearing within the Inner World, there was much consideration that needed to be given. And if everything worked out well, there would be no end to human greed.

If an A-class core could be handled, people would no doubt reach out to get

their hands on an S-class core. And if an accident happened with an S-class core, a nation or two could be completely destroyed.

After seeing the Alpha soldiers off, Alus looked over the testing ground.

I can't say everything worked out, but it went well enough.

Loki had cleaned up the incense and carpet at some point. With that, the special training was a success for now. When he'd seen Tesfia and Alice wake up and become fully conscious again, Alus had been more or less convinced of it.

A smile crept up on his face. "Besides, Principal, you're the one who pawned them off on me. I can't have you thinking that I'll pull back from it now."

Alus thought to himself that things were just getting interesting. There was no longer any room to doubt Tesfia's and Alice's excellence. They had the potential of one in a thousand, but today had been the first time he'd been certain they would change.

While it wouldn't happen right away, they could awaken to that potential.

"I'll have a look as soon as we get back," said Alus.

Returning to his room in a somewhat merry mood, Alus found the familiar faces resting. Hest was also standing expressionlessly squeezed in between some equipment.

"How are you holding up?" he asked.

"Huh? Uhm, I guess it feels kind of strange..." said Tesfia.

The two girls couldn't really put their change in words, and they exchanged looks.

"You said this would give us more mana...but is there really a big change, Al?" asked Alice.

"It seems you've steadily expanded your mana vessel. While there might be some difference, you've only really gotten a little more mana right now. But the real change is coming after this. Whenever you exhaust your mana, you should be able to feel the amount of mana within you increase. But you'll need to control the mana inside of you, so be careful. Also, your mana recovery speed

should gradually change as well. The results will be worth the risk.”

“You think so?” asked Alice.

The two girls moved a little mana to the palm of their hand and stared at it in confusion. From a glance, it seemed they couldn’t use their mana control well enough yet. But while it had only been for a brief moment, the two had overflowed with mana.

Alus realized that it might be best to silence that and return to the usual speed and flow. “All right, I think it’s time for you to use up some of your mana. And Alice, you can acquire a new spell while you’re at it. I’ll pick something out later.”

Before that though, Alus moved up to Tesfia and lightly grabbed her wrist.

“Wh-What?” she asked.

“There was a little accident, and you were out of control for a moment. Fortunately your mana vessel didn’t break... Hmm, you seem okay and your mana is stable.”

That may just have been the greatest result of the pair’s daily mana control training. If their level of control had been lower, that moment would have been enough for the vessel to be destroyed.

And despite the disturbance afterward, they had been able to quell any mana outbursts thanks to their training. Of course, if their mana control weren’t as good as they were, Alus wouldn’t have brought up the special method anyway.

“For starters, I beat the crap out of the guys who got in the way. It’s been a while since I felt such a chill,” said Alus.

“That’s what I wanted to ask about!” An anguished Lilisha held a finger up and spoke. “If the aftermath’s not handled properly, it could become an international incident.”

“Don’t be stupid. They should thank me for not letting it go further than that. I’ll explain things to the principal later, and in the worst case, I can just have Berwick step in,” said Alus.

With the governor-general’s authority, he could deal with the aftermath with

Hydrange without difficulty, although it might require him explaining why a Single like Alus was in the Institute in the first place.

“Then there’s Tesfia’s bodyguard. While she may have a duty to protect, as someone not in the military, she could be more problematic,” said Lilisha.

Tesfia’s eyes opened wide at Lilisha’s comment. How strange for her to worry about the Fable family when they were like cats and dogs.

When she heard her name, Hest appeared from the gap between the equipment. Lilisha turned around to see the expressionless woman.

“Hest. It’s a pleasure to meet you,” said Hest.

“N-Nice to meet you,” said Lilisha, giving her an awkward smile.

In reality, Lilisha had already met her before. She was one of the maids she had fought when infiltrating the Fable family. It had been two-on-one back then, but she probably couldn’t win in a fair fight either.

I’m not very good with this woman. That reminds me, she used a claw-type AWR before. I guess there really were users aside from me.

Lilisha had received one of the fingers of Magdala from Selva, and the Fable family held on to the remaining five. That said, she’d received it out of goodwill, so she had no intention of prying into it.

“Well, if it impacts the Fable family, I’m sure Mrs. Frose will do something about it, but a guard that runs wild will just cause problems. I can’t help but worry about the future,” said Lilisha.

“Oh, how unusual...”

Lilisha cut Tesfia off and turned her eyes on Alus instead. “Say, Alus. Could you do that to me too next time?” she asked.

The girl looked up at Alus with pleading eyes, hoping to charm him. Lilisha didn’t specialize in magic, but she knew enough about mana that just looking at its movement within Tesfia and Alice was enough to tell her about their change. She’d never heard about that kind of trick before. As an onlooker, it was hard to tell what they’d done, but it was clear that there had been a big change to their mana.

When it came to mana control, Lilisha was a match for Loki. No, when it came to mana steel thread, she could skillfully use it better than Loki. While she specialized in intelligence and antipersonnel combat, there were benefits that had need of enhancing.

“It’s not like I can’t do it, but don’t say it like it’s so easy.” With a reluctant expression, Alus put his hand on his forehead to start thinking.

“Wait a second, I’m first!” Loki interrupted. She stood in the way of Lilisha with her arms swung open and excitedly breathing.

“The two of them did it fine this time, so we could do it together too,” said Lilisha.

“What do you say, Sir Alus?” Loki turned around to Alus, her cheeks puffed up for some reason.

And he answered...

“Well, it’s possible. But I don’t have the materials I need for Lilisha. Just for your information, it uses a core.”

“Whaaaaat?! You brought in a core?!” exclaimed Tesfia.

“R-Really?! What should I do? To think it uses that...” Lilisha said at the same time.

“Well, there’s no danger, so don’t worry. There’s a way you can bring it with you without it activating. Anyway, I don’t have a core for Lilisha. That said, I do happen to have a B-class core on me...”

Alus revealed the core with a bitter expression. While he’d deactivated it, it was something he’d wanted to dispose of sooner rather than later. There was no guarantee that there wouldn’t be a commotion like when the Magicmasters from Hydrange had stepped in.

“Why can’t I use that then?!” asked Lilisha.

“It has a little too much mana. I’d rather want a C-class,” said Alus.

“What’s with that, you need to make adjustments for every person?” Lilisha tapped her temple to put everything in order before pointing at Tesfia and Alice. “Then what did these two use?”

“A B-class.”

At that answer, Lilisha could hear a chortle from the redhead. Tesfia used a B-class core, while Lilisha needed a C-class. As if to say the difference between them was plain.

“That kind of pisses me off! But I’m fine with that one, please!” Lilisha gave up on fighting Tesfia and changed strategy. She pleaded while grabbing hold of Alus’s clothes.

“You’re in the way,” Alus said and pushed Lilisha away. He just wasn’t good at this kind of thing.

Perhaps she’d been paying close attention to his interactions with the principal since she was showing her womanly side more blatantly and cunningly. Seeing no other option, Alus explained while keeping Lilisha away from him.

“You’re certainly good at mana control, but in a way you’re too good. So even while you’re active, you keep your mana consumption low when it needs to be consumed in order to increase. You get that too, don’t you? Frankly, your amount of mana is less than Fia’s. And due to the nature of the method of expanding your mana vessel, taking in more mana than necessary is dangerous. That was plainly clear this time. A B-class was too much even for Fia and Alice.”

“What? So in my case it won’t be as dangerous, and I’ll be properly supported. Then that’s fine.” Lilisha convinced herself and nodded with a triumphant smile. And with the smile still on her face she pressed Alus further. “So when do we do it? Now? Or tomorrow?”

“Like I said, there’s no core for you.” Alus was dumbfounded.

But the fact that they were having this kind of exchange showed Lilisha was already a part of their group, the group of “merry friends” as Loki would call it.

“Then I’ll bring it! Will you tell me how you get a core?”

“Don’t be ridiculous. You’re not the type of person to go out into the Outer World. I’ll prepare one on my side.”

“Okaaay,” Lilisha said, hanging her head.

In the end, she ended up making more work for Alus.

Honestly, Alus didn't see all that much point in using the secret method to increase Lilisha's mana since she specialized in fighting using mana itself rather than magic. But if she herself wanted it, he supposed he could help.

If there's a time when Loki or I go outside... And if not I could just ask Lettie or someone.

Alus's shoulders dropped, but for the time being, he made plans to perform the secret method on Loki first.

"It's a promise, okay?" said Lilisha. "Well, I'm going to be busy so it doesn't have to happen right away. But make sure to contact me when you've finished preparations."

"Yeah, yeah. More importantly..." Alus suddenly put his mouth to Lilisha's ear and whispered, "I want you to look into the Four Books of Fegel. Whatever you can find will do. Kurama has a few books, so I want to know how they're getting them."

"Excuse me?" Lilisha asked, looking surprised.

However, having heard what Kwinska knew, she should understand what he meant. And with Kurama being behind Ambrosia, it wasn't like they were unrelated to Aferka. But more importantly, it was hard for Lilisha to turn down Alus at this point.

Lilisha sighed. "I understand. But don't blame me if I don't find anything."

"It's a give-and-take deal," Alus said with a nasty grin.

Still, being able to boss around the commander of the unit serving directly under the ruler was a pleasant feeling. It'd be a pain if Cicelnia found out, but she caused problems for him too, so it was only fair.

After that, Tesfia and Alice continued their usual mana-control training. Alus hadn't noticed, but their goal had secretly changed from becoming a first-rate Magicmaster to becoming a Single.

Alus had only mentioned the possibility, but the lingering memories of the special training were pushing them ahead. They were completely fired up,

letting their passion take over. And incidentally, Alus was busy with the necessary procedures to pick out and create a spell for Alice to learn.

While taking a breather, he considered further tasks to assign to the three girls.

Alice would have to start with mastering her control over the rings of her AWR, Shangdi Fides. The device was something Alus and Budna had put a lot of effort into, and it would no doubt hold up to being the AWR of a Single.

Her control over the rings with her fingers was near perfect. Once she got a little more used to it, he would have her move on to controlling them freely without the assistance of her fingers.

With that special function, Alice would be able to manifest any spells she learned at each of the three rings as well as the main body, for a total of four places at the same time. Plus Alus believed that by passing through a ring, the strength of a spell would double. Therefore, complete mastery of the rings was essential, as in the future, she would be able to finish a battle by only flying the rings around. She wouldn't have to take a single step.

As for Tesfia, she would need to master Cocytus.

It was hard for Alus to know for certain without seeing it in person, but from what he'd been told, Dante had shuddered for a moment when touching Tesfia during his attack on the Institute. Alus wondered what he had seen in Tesfia. Or perhaps Tesfia had done something to Dante while losing sight of herself.

Reaching a decision, Alus looked at Tesfia and Alice and stood. He folded his arms across his chest.

"Hmm, you should start repeatedly trying to use Cocytus from today on," Alus said to a dumbfounded Tesfia.

"You still don't have enough mana, but you should be able to partially manifest it without problems," Alus proclaimed, causing Tesfia to awkwardly clear her throat.

After a pause, Tesfia took out her katana-type AWR, Kikuri, prompting everyone else to take a step back.

“Don’t worry. I’m not expecting you to be able to pull it off in one try,” said Alus.

“I-I know that. But you know, I was a little reckless before, right?” asked Tesfia.

“Is that what you were worried about? You don’t seem to be in that bad of a shape to me. Your mana is pretty stable too. You won’t be running around either, so your injury shouldn’t hurt,” said Alus.

But there was still a hint of anguish in Tesfia’s face. After all, her progress was much worse than Alice’s. There may have been a matter of difference in difficulty, but she couldn’t help but compare. The assignment created a sense of urgency that she was not making any progress.

But in this situation, Tesfia could only resign herself. She exhaled and began to refine her mana. She then slowly opened her eyes...

Is that...? The magic formula on her grip is reacting. Fia’s stance on using magic is different from before, thought Alus.

Alus didn’t overlook the slight change in Tesfia. He didn’t know how aware of it she was, but Tesfia was currently lowering her heart rate to sleeping levels, and her mana was obediently responding.

Cold air began to form around Tesfia. Suddenly, she reached her hand forward, toward Alus. Tesfia, in a trancelike state, exhaled a white breath and looked at Alus with vacant eyes.

She looked like she had expelled all emotions, but it was much purer than what Alus or Hest might show. Her eyes had a pale-blue color, as if they’d frozen from the cold air. Likewise, her vivid red hair had become whiter from the cold air. And magic glowed in the five fingers she’d thrust forward.

Alus gulped.

Tesfia was tracing the magic formula with unmatched precision, but it looked like the spell itself was matching her. Like two gears, meshing perfectly together, the magic and caster made concessions to the other, forming the spell through a sort of harmony.

While Tesfia might have an affinity for the ice attribute, it was rare for someone to be so compatible. Moreover, he never really had a chance to see Tesfia's natural talents up close, so it was even more surprising.

She's a natural. Did she awaken after the expansion?

Even considering her affinity for the ice attribute that was the only explanation for why she would be able to reproduce an ultimate-level spell like Cocytus to this degree. It was still far from its complete form, but she had fulfilled the necessary structural requirements.

Tesfia was tired and lowered her arm, and the space was left with five finger-sized freeze marks. They left trails in the air as if drawn by a brush.

"This is the same as Al..." Alice inadvertently blurted out as Tesfia fell to her knees and undid her spell. The ice remaining in the air fell to the ground and vanished without a trace.

Tesfia had looked composed while using the magic, but now she was sweating buckets. Heat rose up from her body.

"H-How, haah, haah... How...was it?" she asked.

"Hmm, that wasn't what I intended, but you did do it," said Alus.

It would have been hard to believe if she'd managed one finger, but she had done it with five. She'd cleared her assignment, but there were some points that were incomprehensible.

At her current level, she still shouldn't have been able to manifest that spell. However, something had assisted and guided her.

That AWR, Kikuri. It looked like it forcibly adapted the magic formula, thought Alus. Having drawn out more power than usual had left Tesfia exhausted. She looked physically tired, but her brain was even more exhausted. Alus had her sit down on the crude sofa.

"You cleared the assignment, but it's still too early for you to use this spell. You'll need to increase your mana some more and train your processing power some more," he said.

Tesfia took a cup of water Loki offered her, and she drank it with shaky hands.

Still, I'm a little stumped. The unexpected development bothered Alus. Perhaps this had been what had bothered Dante, in which case, the expansion of the mana vessel was probably just a trigger.

Tesfia was already starting to master Cocytus. The problem was that she was becoming able to handle the spell faster than she could understand it, and that could be cause for concern.

At this rate, rather than using magic, she might end up getting used by it instead. Or rather, being used by the AWR, which went beyond the processing power and comprehension.

It was like the AWR was the one that demanded mana in order to construct a spell. Originally, the caster would build up the magic formula with the AWR merely assisting. Otherwise, the caster was just an energy source for the AWR.

Inherited spells are probably involved so the processing power required from the caster is pretty high, thought Alus.

The Fable family's AWR, Kikuri, might well be a trial run for the secret heir, the Ertlade. It had no doubt reacted to the hidden magic formula that was the third stage of Cocytus.

In other words, Tesfia might finally be qualified to challenge the Ertlade.

By acquiring the inherited spell, she would become the Fable family's successor in its true sense. And that moment was surely quickly approaching.

That made Alus think about Selva's warning, but this was probably not at a stage where he'd need to worry, so he acknowledged Tesfia's growth.

"That's your assignment cleared for now, Fia. There are still some problems, but they can be ironed out later."

"All right!" Tesfia pumped her fist and smiled.

Regardless of how it came to be, her efforts had paid off. Her talents were being inflated right now, but that wouldn't continue for long.

All that was left was Alus's own feelings. Tesfia had talent that surpassed the somewhat-excellent Magicmasters. With a furrowed brow, Alus's shoulders dropped and he decided not to think too deeply about Tesfia for now.

He recollected himself and focused on the next objective, as he'd given assignments to all three girls.

Incidentally, after that Loki cleared her assignment first despite it being the most dangerous one. Her talents rivaled Tesfia's. Alus couldn't help but pity the students that went to the Institute with people like them, excluding himself.

It was still hard to believe she'd learned Fire Ikazuchi, but the assignment Alus had given her this time required her to not just optimize the spell but also coordinate with the beast she summoned, and she was able to do so at a high level, because unlike Tesfia, she had properly learned the spell.

Alus was simply left speechless.

Alus and Loki had been in the military's Magicmaster Raising Project since childhood and received training and experience on par with adults. They had persevered through the training and exhibited exceptional capabilities as Magicmasters, so naturally, Loki had more than enough experience to deviate from the norm.

After quickly passing her assignment, Loki was back to doing housework and speaking with Lilisha, who had nothing else to do.

Alus wondered what ranking Loki would get now and just what would happen during the next mana vessel expansion. He also wondered how high Tesfia's and Alice's ranks would increase after the special training.

For some reason, he felt like he was at his wit's end, but there was nothing he could do. They were simply growing in accordance with their talent.

With a turbulent day coming to an end, it was about time for Tesfia and the others to leave. That was when an orderly knock sounded from the door to Alus's residence.

Loki hesitated for a moment but swiftly headed to the door. Shortly thereafter, she returned with a familiar maid in tow.

"Oh, it's you, Minasha. What is it?" Tesfia asked in surprise.

Minasha, like Hest, had been sent by the Fable family to look after Tesfia. Today, she had stayed at the dorm to clean out the room.

Normally Minasha was quite friendly, but today she seemed to be in a rush, and her breathing was ragged. It seemed like she'd run over here at full speed.

"Young lady, I received sudden word from the master...and I come bearing her message," she said.

With some difficulty, she weaved her way through the cluttered equipment to Tesfia. On her way, she glimpsed Hest standing between the gaps and let out a scream. When she finally arrived, she had to gather her breath before speaking.

"I have a message from the master. A letter determining the date and time for the Tenbram has been received. Therefore, you are to return to the house as soon as possible and devote yourself to preparations. She also requests that Sir Alus accompany you."

"Hmm, it's been a point of concern for a long time, but it's finally here. I almost forgot what I've studied on the Tenbram," Tesfia said with a smile. Her former timid attitude was gone, and now she seemed like she was looking forward to it.

"Uhm, so Al. I have a request to make..." said Tesfia. And just like that, her brazen attitude had disappeared as she meekly reconfirmed Alus's cooperation.

That said, Alus had been waiting for this too. Tesfia didn't know, but due to Womruina's involvement with the escaped prisoners and the illegal drug, their footing was starting to become rather unstable, although that wasn't something that could be seen from the public stage.

If anything happened to them, they might fall from one of the three great nobles to that of a wanted family.

"Yeah, I got it." The thought that it was finally happening came to Alus's mind alongside the thought that they were still going to do it.

The Tenbram that would decide Tesfia's future was a traditional problem-solving method that both the Fable and Womruina families had agreed on.

Tesfia stopped her training and plopped down on the sofa and took a deep breath. The sudden message on the Tenbram had shaken her, but it wasn't enough to make her lose her nerves.

“I’ll be fine. Al will be with me too. I’ve been training for this.”

“You’re still injured, but a week should be enough for all the pain to go away,” said Alus.

“Right.” Tesfia’s expression drastically changed.

Alus could tell her about the circumstances behind the Womruina family, but her being overly optimistic could be problematic too, so he chose to keep quiet instead.

“Fia, you’re going to be fine! Keep it together!” Alice encouraged Tesfia in Alus’s place, holding her hand with a powerful look.

“Leave it to me, Alice.” Tesfia held her hand back and gave her a determined smile before nodding to Minasha.

There hadn’t been any serious countermeasures put in place because the date for the Tenbram hadn’t been decided. And with the escaped prisoner incident, the Inner World should have been very busy right now, so this move of Womruina’s was unexpected.

Aile von Womruina might have been unable to back down for various reasons, but what were his intentions of beginning the Tenbram now? It might have been a move to break out of the current situation.

“Lilisha, how are things looking in that regard?” asked Alus.

“You mean about the referee? Naturally, as part of the Rimfuge family, I will take responsibility to serve as the referee. I’ve crammed the rules and regulations into my head too.”

Even during the test period, Lilisha had been studying up on the Tenbram. Her test scores had been poor as a result, but that didn’t matter now.

“I see. Then I’ll be in touch when we get to the Fable family,” said Alus.

“Okay,” Lilisha casually responded.

Alus wasn’t particularly worried either. *Now then, what is that slimy Aile going to pull out? I hope I can at least look forward to that.*

From Alus’s point of view, he was getting dragged into problems between

nobles, but there was no point grumbling about something already decided. It had been since the Seven Nations Friendly Magical Tournament that they'd had a battle with rules. Alus could only hope that it would be a fun way to kill time. If he was going to do it, he wanted it to be worth it.

Besides...Tesfia's value was completely different from before. And considering her future prospects, it was almost a waste to do it for free.

Although she was still somewhat unreliable and putting up a brave front, her spirit was much stronger than before. Dante's attack on the Institute had given her a great deal of determination.

Moreover, the mana vessel expansion was a success, and there was that glimpse of talent she'd just shown... She was taking firm steps down the road to reach further heights as a Magicmaster, and the Womruinas would serve as a good springboard for her to take flight.

To reach the true strengths of a Magicmaster, overcoming difficult battles to grow further was something necessary.

Conversely, it was the only thing Alus couldn't teach. Even the Tenbram should serve as a good foothold for her to gain more experience.

While Tesfia was still nervous, Alus thought of Aile and had a sense of anticipation of the noble boy with a nasty smile plastered on his face.

Do your best to play the clown, he thought.

Ninety-Third Chapter

She Who Reaps Souls

Within Alpha, only the richest could afford to live relatively close to Babel, and only a few nobles received territory directly from the ruler. Many other nobles maintained mansions in this prime location, not due to the ruler's influence but rather by their lineage.

This mansion was where one such noble lived.

It had a huge gate that was surrounded by a thick grove of trees, and in this season, the wind blowing through them was enough for anyone lightly clothed to feel chilly. Even so, the human domain protected by the walls of Babel was relatively warm.

In the Outer World there probably weren't many animals around in this season. However, the trees here didn't seem to lose their leaves in the cold. In fact, they seemed full of life. Around this mansion there seemed to be a lot of plants that deviated from the natural world.

Next to the greenery was a long tile-paved road. Ahead was a sturdy gate, and past that, a mansion the size of ten ordinary houses awaiting visitors.

Security patrolled the garden of the massive building at all times. The guards had a quirk or two, but they clearly displayed skills they had honed as Magicmasters. If any trespassers stepped inside, they would find themselves surrounded and restrained.

And now, two figures were standing in the study on the second floor of the mansion the size of a small mountain.

The first was a man... He was in the process of receiving a report from the beautiful girl before him. And then, as usual, he found a flaw in the report and reprimanded her before heading for the basement with her.

The round man had a vulgar taste. Just like smokers smoked daily or workers

drank to relieve the day's frustrations...he enjoyed and loved bullying. At some point, it had become a habit that he just couldn't quit.

Leaving the study, the man walked down the stairs with light steps betraying his unsightly, overweight physique. Everyone aside from him and the girl were forbidden from entering, so only two pairs of footsteps clacked against the stone steps, and they arrived at a soundproofed, dimly lit stone room.

The walls were covered in repulsive tools. Each covered in red stains and rust as proof of their use.

Following the man, the girl showed no signs of agitation upon entering the room and simply presented herself to him. He reached out to the wall and grabbed handcuffs, which he clasped around her arms.

At the same time, he pulled on the end of chains hanging from the ceiling, causing the iron rings to clank as he pulled the chain through the handcuffs, and pulled the girl's supple body up into the air.

The girl was lifted to the height where her toes just barely touched the ground. She then turned to the man and spoke out in an expressionless manner.

"Your Excellency, preparations are complete."

"Good, a lot of things happened today."

"Yes, now you can do as you please..."

Morwald, the fat man she had called His Excellency, took a step closer with a distorted smile and ecstatic expression on his greasy face. He spun the girl's body around by force, turning her back to him, then grabbed hold of her collar and tore a rip in her clothes.

The exposed milky white skin had a fresh youthfulness. However, the girl showed no shame, and Morwald showed no concern for her. Instead, he looked at the scene in front of him like a painter confirming his work. And after rubbing his cheek against her back, a sadistic grin crept up on his face.

He had just spotted the wounds carved into her white canvas. Each spoke of the months and years that the girl had served as a toy for Morwald's sadistic

desires.

He felt pleasure in destroying something beautiful. He no longer explained the difference between lofty nobles and the riffraff like when he'd first gotten his hand on her.

To him, others, especially commoners, were nothing more than bugs crawling at his feet, and he could crush them whenever he felt like it. That was all he thought of them, and that was what the difference in status was. If they upset Morwald, commoners would need to stake their lives to please him—in fact, they should be doing so from the beginning. Nobles were an absolute existence and it was the proof of their exalted status.

Morwald slowly traced his finger across the wounds on the girl's back.

"What wound was this again? It's pretty deep," he asked.

"Your Excellency, that is from the steel whip," she said.

"Ah, I see. Then today's punishment will be the steel whip."

"As you wish."

In high spirits, Morwald selected one of the many whips on the wall. A steel whip was a whip reinforced by wrapping steel around it, but it was flawed in that it was heavy and inflexible.

"Hmm..." After grabbing the whip, Morwald groaned and threw it away before selecting another one. Thinking back to the humiliation he'd suffered recently, he smiled creepily as if he was feeling elated.

"HOW DARE MERE TRASH LIKE YOU BOTHER MEEE!!!"

Swinging the whip as he turned around, it sliced through the air and whipped the girl's back. Instantly, her body jerked.

"How dare that Berwick... Who does he think I am! I am sure he's laughing as he watches me put out the fires! Hah, well, no matter. He'll come to know his foolishness eventually. No, I'll show him myself! Isn't that right, Noir?" he asked.

The girl's ashen-colored hair swayed as she answered in a clear voice as if not feeling any pain. "It is just as you say, Your Excellency."

Having carved a fresh wound into her smooth white back, Morwald smiled sadistically.

“I’m sorry about that. Doing the same thing every day would get boring. So that was a little surprise. How was it?”

“Yes, I could strongly feel your love,” the girl answered.

“I see. Good girl. This is a multijointed steel whip. I saw a Magicmaster using something similar and wanted one for myself. I added it to the order of new torture tools. You see the little spines sticking out of the joint parts that overlap like skin? When you pull the whip like this they catch on the skin,” Morwald explained.

“What a wonderful invention.”

“It is, isn’t it? But the scraps of clothes on your body got in the way a little.”

“I am sorry. I should have worn soft silk fabric.”

“Don’t worry. This is entertainment in its own way. Still...when I think about those people getting lured out without realizing, I feel more satisfied. They don’t know a thing, Noir,” said Morwald.

“It is just as you say,” answered Noir.

“Law and order are simply to control the fools. They can’t bind someone of noble blood like me,” Morwald said and swung the whip at the girl’s slender waist. He forcibly pulled it back, causing the plates and spines to tear more of the cloth.

Before long the girl’s clothes had been ripped away and fresh wounds started to appear. Blood flowed out from the red scars that carved into her at regular intervals.

“That should help alleviate my stress. Everything is going well, and how did things go for you?” Morwald asked.

“The preparations are proceeding smoothly. Three families were destroyed...but there was interference at the fourth,” said Noir.

“Oh, it’s rare for you to blunder. But it’s good to hear that three houses were destroyed. I’ll need to give you a reward. So how about—this!” The whip raged

even more and fresh blood splattered across the stone room like red roses, and the remaining scraps of clothes absorbed the blood dripping onto the girl's waist.

"Thank you very much."

Morwald listened to the detached words of gratitude with an ecstatic expression. He approached her naked body and rubbed his cheek against her, not caring about the blood.

"Good girl, Noir...I am truly glad I took you in."

"Thank you very much. It is thanks to Your Excellency that I was able to become full strength. I belong to Your Excellency, down to the last drop of blood and last scrap of flesh."

"You are the perfect girl. You used to cry cuter when you first came, but the way you are now is quite enjoyable as well," said Morwald.

"I will be anything you desire, Your Excellency..." the girl said, vacantly staring at the cold stone wall.

For that she was rewarded with even more pain running up her back. Or was it even pain... Noir could suppress it to its limit and rewrite it into a sense of nothingness.

Still, she liked to believe that she had felt real pain in the past. A painless world was simply too boring.

At first the torture had been so painful, but eventually she got so used to it that it didn't even show on her face, and eventually she found herself feeling nothing. She struggled to remember what pain had felt like.

Even now she just felt the sobering heat and flat impact she was so accustomed to. Besides, she had been saved, and as someone still living she had nothing to complain about.



She felt a sort of resignation and enlightenment. In fact, she believed that was the best way to deal with the incomprehensible thing that was life. So she purposefully let out moans of rapture to delight the man.

Suddenly, the impact and heat that burned her back stopped.

“Hmph, how boring. Did you think that acting would please me?” Morwald asked and grabbed her hair, pulling her head back.

“I am sorry, Your Excellency.”

“Hmm, I might have pulled a little too hard...or did you want more?”

“I would have loved more, but there is an intruder,” said Noir.

“Hmm?! Who is it?”

“I don’t know, but I believe they are very skilled.”

“I take it they’ve already gotten wind of it.”

The girl was the strongest Magicmaster Morwald had, so if she said someone was there, there was no doubt. He also had an idea of who it may be.

“I can guess who it is. I went out of my way to invite them, but this insolent fool has terrible timing,” he said.

“Shall I kill them?” the girl asked.

“Of course. Finish it already. Bring me his corpse. I have a long history with him, so perhaps I will raise a toast in front of his corpse,” Morwald said, regretfully hanging the whip back up on the wall and yanking the chain back down.

This man thought he was smarter and more special than anyone, so he had a desire to make others submit. He wanted to control everything. Nobody else in this world was as valuable as he was.

However, that wasn’t what reality was like, which was why his irritation and frustration built up. In order to vent, and to satisfy his self-esteem, he tortured someone helpless.

Because he had the right, authority, and power to do so.

“There’s no need for healing magic,” he said.

“Understood.”

The girl removed her handcuffs on her own and made no attempt to hide her exposed chest as she accepted the thin cloth from Morwald and put on a robe on top of that.



Intruders had infiltrated the garden and blended in with the darkness. They settled into the shadows and looked at the brightly lit mansion. They’d all been eagerly awaiting this moment. However, their primary job was information gathering, and not being able to directly wield their power was frustrating.

The owner of that large mansion had an extraordinary connection to Vizaist Socalent, the leader of the intelligence unit.

Since Berwick had taken his position, a gap that couldn’t be filled had formed between the two factions. On one side were Morwald and the old noble faction, and it wouldn’t be an exaggeration to say that they were the embodiment of the corruption within the military and political world.

No matter how optimistic one might be, a few days serving at the military command would let them know how deep the gap was and that a clash was inevitable.

“Still, why not take a few days off, Captain? This might be a golden opportunity, but your daughter was taken to the hospital, wasn’t she?”

“Don’t speak unless necessary,” said the captain in a reprimanding tone to the worried team member.

Normally that would silence him, but he resisted this time. “But Lady Felinella is an important comrade of ours too.”

Vizaist had only let Felinella join the intelligence unit at her own request, but she’d already become an irreplaceable member. Even though she was working while also attending the Institute, her skills and achievements were impressive.

“So why don’t you...?”

“That’s enough.” Another reprimand flew at a different member who spoke up.

“If that’s what you think, just finish this job quickly. In fact, think of our job here as making time for the captain to visit his daughter.”

The first intelligence operative who’d spoken out of place shrugged his shoulders. Things had gone as everyone had expected. That was why his colleague spoke in a flat tone.

While they didn’t say it out loud, they all shared the same consideration for Vizaist, whose daughter had been injured. So it had only been a matter of who’d bring up the topic first. Depending on the circumstances, the roles between the team members might have been reversed.

Knowing that, he quickly apologized and that was the end of it.

“Excuse me... Team B, nothing to report.”

“Team C, nothing to report. They haven’t caught onto us.”

“Good, maintain this distance. Any closer and they might notice,” Vizaist instructed the team over the Consensor.

According to the information they had, the enemy Magicmasters were primarily focused on combat, so they shouldn’t know about their whereabouts yet. Everyone working under Vizaist were expert intelligence operatives. Their skills were focused on stealth operations over combat.

Even so, this time was different. The guards weren’t much of a concern, but the presence of Morwald’s own shadows, the Kruelsaith, concerned them.

Aware of them or not, Vizaist’s subordinates felt that his orders were uncharacteristically cautious. Normally, they would have been within fifty meters of the mansion. However, in Vizaist’s mind, staying two hundred and ten meters from the mansion was the optimal range based on risk and return.

If the intelligence operatives’ mission was to watch the enemy’s movements, they couldn’t just stay far away. At times they would need to attempt to close in as much as possible and steal even the smallest piece of information.

Normally, Vizaist had faith in his team and gave more aggressive orders. This

time, however, they were only allowed to act on their own judgment up until the garden. Once inside, Vizaist was giving out specific orders, a sign of how careful he was being.

Vizaist called for his men to stay vigilant while looking down at the mansion from a tree.

He used a monocle to look through the gaps in the foliage and observed key spots. As the other party might be sensitive, he avoided using magic means.

Berwick was worried that Morwald might have a Magicmaster that rivals a Single. His hunches always hit the marks when it hurts the most, thought Vizaist.

Being allowed to keep a private force capable of using magic was a privilege of nobles. Nobles had an obligation to contribute to the military, and many employed mercenaries in addition to their relatives.

Furthermore, once one becomes a high-ranking military officer with a proven record, they could form their own unit in the military. But Morwald, the leader of the old noble faction, had his own private army separate from that unit.

Although Vizaist's usual activities were both domestic and international, his focus was on magical criminals, and until now, noble society had been outside of his scope of activities. But this time, he'd made full use of his connections to practically steal this mission from Aferka. This was no doubt a big chance to put an end to his relationship with them.

Recently, nobles with a connection to Morwald had been slaughtered, and Vizaist suspected that Morwald had had it done to purge or silence them, which meant he must be in quite a hurry. And the mansion in the distance was eerily quiet.

Rotten or not, he was a high-ranking noble and the vast mansion had security on the same level as a military facility. It was all a sign of the cowardice he hid behind arrogance. But he was still a Major General, and he wouldn't be so easy to get.

In addition to the troops under Berwick's command, he also had Alus and Lettie, two Singles. And since Morwald was after the governor-general position, there was no way he wouldn't prepare. And when he'd looked into Morwald's

forces, the suspicious group called Kruelsaith had been popping up lately.

The slaughter of three noble families had been executed disturbingly well. They were finished quickly and with no hesitation. Having come to the sites personally, Vizaist strongly believed it was the Kruelsaith that was responsible for it, which made him even more cautious.

Aside from the security before them, if Kruelsaith came forward, it could develop into a flashy battle of magic. Although troublesome, Vizaist had more or less prepared for that since the moment he took control of this operation.

I wonder how good Kruelsaith really is. I would like to at least get a good read on their numbers.

Normally Vizaist took charge and gave orders from the rear, but this time he was coming on-site himself, thoroughly prepared. Before they began, he put on a mask.

However, in the moment that the moon was covered by clouds, the shadows surrounding the treetop became even darker, closing off his senses. It only lasted a few seconds, but Vizaist, who'd survived countless battles in the Outer World, got serious goose bumps. His muscles involuntarily stiffened, and a chill ran down his neck. He sensed danger.

Whenever that happened, Vizaist always trusted his intuition. His experience told him as much. The moment he felt that chill, his body moved spontaneously without any delay. He strongly kicked off of the tree he was hiding in, with no regard for being discovered, and made his way directly to the ground.

When he looked up at the treetop where he'd been hiding, it slid to the side and fell down. It was a terrifying scene, as if the space itself had been cut to pieces.

Leaves and sliced twigs fell from above.

When he saw that, Vizaist knew he had been right to trust his intuition. He touched his neck with his fingers and found them wet with blood. Using his usual footwork, he landed without his large body making a sound. He caught a glimpse of something long and narrow in the corner of his eyes.

He only just vaguely saw the black staff-like object in the darkness, but he

sensed the countdown to his death and quickly brought his upper body down at the last moment. As he felt a sharp blade on his neck, he jumped backward with all of his might.

Ugh, I've gotten rusty... If I'd been a split second slower, my head would have flown off.

The first attack had left a superficial wound on his neck, and the follow-up attack when he'd been retreating had been a truly chilling experience. As a specialist in intelligence operations, Vizaist found it hard to believe that he'd even allowed such a fearsome foe to get this close.

Then, belatedly, the leaves finally fell to the ground.

In the next moment, he saw the figure of his enemy appear before him without making a sound. Despite being so careful, Vizaist realized he'd deeply underestimated his enemy.

"Kruelsaith," he said, proud to believe that at least he wouldn't end up beaten by mere guards.

Their face was hidden by their hood, and their robe was slightly open in the front. They were the very image of a shadow. However, the thin clothes visible through the gap in the robe appeared to belong to a woman.

Oddly enough, their abdomen was already stained red.

Moonlight coming between gaps in the clouds shone down on the two. Beneath the hood, Vizaist saw gray hair with the luster of a young woman's. He vigilantly observed her, memorizing any information he could get.

She carried a great scythe that didn't suit her slim body. Its tip was held at the height of his neck and drew a cold crescent shape against the night sky. Upon closer inspection, he saw slight quantities of blood on the scythe's blade. Likely remnants from cutting into his neck.

The woman heard his estimation of where she belonged and answered in a calm tone.

"Indeed. But how will knowing that help you? Neither you nor your comrades will leave alive."

It was a slightly provocative and indecent tone of voice, but Vizaist's impression was that she was younger than he'd expected.

However, her words held a surprise for him: not only had she so easily discovered him, she'd even caught on to the existence of the rest of his unit. It was a failure of a covert mission.

Only a few options remained available. Before he was fully exposed, he would deal with her with all of his strength.

Now, I'd like to hope that this one is exceptional...but how many more are there I wonder, Vizaist thought.

First he'd consider putting down the enemy in front of him in order to continue the mission. He'd gotten no reports from the rest of the team members, so this could be considered the actions of a lone operative.

It took him only a moment to make a decision. His numerous experiences led him to his answer. Without taking his eyes off of his opponent, he used one hand to tap his ear three times with his nail.

Naturally, there was no answer from the Consensor.

He'd made the sign for an emergency situation... Two taps meant a tactical retreat; three meant to get away no matter what. Incidentally, four taps meant to kill themselves and leave no evidence behind; it was meant for the worst possible situations.

But with the elites Vizaist had gathered, there had only been a few times when there had been more than three taps in the past. The situation wasn't bad enough to call for that.

The subordinates that received the message should have already blended in with the darkness to make their escape, but it was a horribly bitter pill for Vizaist to swallow when the girl spoke to him.

"Are you done? I hope they can all make their escape."

She'd seen through his intentions, and she sarcastically wished his subordinates good luck. As she toyed around with him, her lips twisted.

Vizaist caught a glimpse of her moist eyes peeking through the darkness of

her hood. She then tilted her scythe back to bring the tip closer to her mouth, licking off the blood.

Vizaist concluded that she was seeing right through him, but his heart was awfully calm. He had a resolve different from that of a Magicmaster and lived in the shadow of his nation, which meant he'd always known that eventually the time would come when he would die in secret.

For some, that might end up being on their first mission.

Intelligence operatives staked their lives in work that was different from the heroics of fighting Fiends. But those resolved to do so lied about their existence to complete their mission in this unit.

Some among them weren't even recognizable as Magicmasters. They pretended to be normal citizens, with normal families, but they all concealed their job from the public.

In that sense, Vizaist was the only one who publicly acknowledged his job and stood in the light of day. Even if his methods or subordinates were never revealed, as the leader of the shadows, he always had to maintain his pride and resolve.

"It seems my skills have dulled," Vizaist blurted out in a muffled voice under his mask and decided to see what his opponent would do first. It would likely be difficult to escape from the girl before him.

The girl was already wounded for some reason, but there was just so much he didn't know about her. Her age might not be all that different from Alus's, and at the same time, she reminded him of how he'd been in the past because of the dangerous air hanging over her.

No, I suppose that's out of the question, thought Vizaist. He's too overwhelming. Not to mention that this girl seems to look down on her opponents. She probably lacks experience. Most of all, she doesn't understand the fear of a battle between Magicmasters.

And if she was letting her guard down, there were still openings for Vizaist to abuse.

"Well, let's begin, then. I can't keep my lord waiting forever," she said.

Mana darker than the dark of night ran through the blade of the great scythe, and the magic formula on the blade glowed faintly.

“Unexpected as it may be, now that it’s come to this I will just have to destroy Kruelsaith,” said Vizaist.

“Well, sorry to say this when you’re so hyped up, but you won’t be able to satisfy me,” the girl responded.

“Hmph, what a thing for a little lady so wet behind the ears to say.”

“Don’t tell me you came here empty-handed?” she asked.

“You’re lucky. I came fully prepared, with weapons on both my arms...!”

“So both arms, then.” The girl narrowed her eyes as she smiled.

It took a while for Vizaist to understand what he’d blurted out. Keeping weapons hidden from the enemy in combat was common sense. Everything from strategies to range was hidden, and even the shape of an AWR could reveal its attribute.

Of course, as a veteran with countless years of experience under his belt, that was all basic knowledge to Vizaist. So why had he made such a mistake at a critical juncture. It was like he understood it was a fatal blunder yet had failed to realize it for some reason.

Vizaist intuitively understood the abnormality. *This is bizarre. She merely used simple words without an underlying motive to bait me. And despite knowing that, I...*

His thoughts were perfectly normal. Yet the brand of enemy he’d marked the girl as gradually felt like it was fading.

He glared at his opponent.

What did you do?! he wanted to ask but couldn’t put it into words.

His experience made him realize that he’d made a mistake. Being shaken led to the enemy realizing your weakness, which would lead to disastrous results. He should assume that he was already entangled in some sort of trap.

Then there’s no way to untangle myself but to fight, Vizaist concluded and

unleashed his mana.

In an instant, an overwhelming storm started blowing. He thrust out his muscular, cudgel-like arms, and the sleeves from the elbow up were blown away. Beneath were thin arm guards that reached up to the elbow like gloves.

A dense whirlwind covered his arms, sucking in the surrounding air. The surface of his arm guard AWRs were covered in a whirlwind of blades so dense that the faint glowing of the magic formulas were invisible. And as they spun they sounded like powerful grinders roaring.

The girl held down her fluttering robe to keep it from getting sucked in as she spoke. "Storm Armor... No. Cyclone Edge."

"Good eye. Cyclone Edge is a pretty boring spell, but when you restrain it to just your arms, it becomes easy to use. It's more than enough to tear you apart."

It was as if his mouth was talking on its own. Vizaist couldn't help but feel deeply confused by his body moving without his consent. *Again...why am I just prattling on?!*

"My! How exactly?" Noir asked.

"...Then take this."

Before his mouth would say anything more, Vizaist pulled his arms back. In reality, this spell put a lot of strain on the caster. The power in the spell was so dense that if he slipped up with his mana control for even a moment it would tear off his arms.

It also relied on brute strength to control, so it put a physical strain on him, but as long as he could deal with that, Vizaist's power would explosively increase. Moreover, since the spell was always on standby to be activated, he could omit part of the process to simplify it.

Against a Magicmaster with a normal AWR, he would always be several fractions of a second faster. He pulled back his arms to the point that they might burst, and after crossing them for an instant to build up even more power, shot them forward.

And from his arms, two cyclones shot out. They roared and sucked in the surrounding leaves as they headed for the girl. They caught everything in their paths, pulling trees out from the roots and cutting them to pieces as the cyclones grew larger.

Although they appeared to be raging wildly, both cyclones were under Vizaist's control. Rather than changing the process, he used his muscles to forcibly change their trajectory. Even if his enemy dodged, he would be able to easily bend the trajectory to some degree.

However, the girl didn't even seem to be trying to dodge.

He'd talked about destroying Kruelsaith, but there was naturally a large risk with that. Once done, there was a chance that if he didn't find any clear evidence against Morwald, Vizaist would find himself in trouble.

The same would be true if one of his subordinates were caught and confessed to illegal activities. In that sense, this battle might not have been the best move.

The wavering thoughts in Vizaist's mind were not something he'd intended.

He'd resolved himself to fight since he'd realized he wouldn't be able to escape. But for some reason, he felt a strange lapse in judgment due to his conscious and subconscious not meshing properly.

The scene playing out in front of Vizaist made his expression stiffen in astonishment. He felt a cold chill run down his spine.

"Oh how gentle," came a cool, mocking voice from the shadow of the night.

The attack Vizaist had unleashed most definitely had enough power to kill. And just before the cyclones reached their target, he crossed his arms again so that they would overlap on top of her. Yet for some reason they crossed before her and both cyclones ended up missing the target.

It was clear from looking at the grooves carved into the ground. Before merging into one and crashing into the girl, they split up to the sides for some reason, harmlessly passing by either side of the girl.

It was like she had some kind of protection that prevented her alone from being harmed.

“What?!” Vizaist groaned bitterly but hastily analyzed the situation.

Did she block it?! No, it doesn't look like it. It was like my magic dodged out of her way.

Interpreting things that way made the most sense. He had definitely been the one in control of the cyclones. They relied on arm strength to begin with, so it should have been impossible to synchronize with the magic like Alus did and steal control of it.

“So next is my turn...!” the girl shouted and spun her scythe.

Just before she leaped at Vizaist, he slammed his thick arm into the ground. A blast shot out in all directions, forcefully slamming into the girl's body and causing it to tilt.

“Don't take this personally, but this isn't a game,” he yelled.



He repositioned his arm and blew a wind from below his opponent. In the process, her hood was blown off, exposing her face. He'd already anticipated that she'd be young, but it still made the deepest recess of his mind buzz. After all, she looked even younger than his own daughter.

But as an experienced veteran, he forced down his instantaneous hesitation with an iron will. Once the girl was in the air, he sent another blast of wind to hit her like a hammer.

I can't waste time! I'm finishing this with Downburst.

The girl was immediately dropped to the ground with a loud thud, her limbs splayed. She seemed to have caught her fall and not taken any real damage, but the pressure kept her from getting up right away.

While it looked overpowering, the spell's power was less than half of what Vizaist had intended. However, he wasn't aware of that.

Timing it with the magic to dissipate, Vizaist thrust his left hand forward. The fingers on his hand spread out, and he grabbed the first joint of the middle finger with the fingers on his right hand to pull it back like a bow.

The AWR glowed with a beam of light, and mana gathered in the middle finger on his left hand.

"How awful... What are you...?" asked Noir, coughing.

When the pressure weakened enough, the girl jumped up and readied her great scythe. Suddenly she sensed something wrong with her voice and put her hand on her neck. For some reason she couldn't breathe or speak like normal.

Just as she had that realization, Vizaist flicked the finger toward her.

"<<Clearance Hazard>>"

Assuming that his attack finished her, Vizaist slowly walked toward the girl. This wasn't the behavior of a winner. Normally, if he'd defeated her, he would swiftly leave the scene.

Even so, his legs and lips continued to move on their own. "When a gale of wind rushes against you, you find it hard to breathe. This is similar to that. The airflow around your mouth was changed to reduce the air pressure. You'll

suffocate soon enough.”

When he declared that she would die, Vizaist felt a pain in his chest. Having gone this far, he started to feel an aversion to killing.

The girl in front of him held her throat and struggled, finally losing her balance and falling to the ground. She tried her best to breathe, but she opened and closed her mouth like a fish on land, unable to suck in any air.

As if to witness the girl’s final moments, Vizaist moved even closer to her.

A lock of gray hair fell over her face, and the limp girl’s face turned pale. The movements of her lips slowed down...and in the next moment, Vizaist saw it. Her lips were twisted into an eerie smile.

Vizaist snapped back to his senses and realized his blunder in approaching the enemy, but it was already too late.

Like faithful servants of the Lord, a light-purple ethereal body appeared right beside him, wavering in the edges of his vision. There were two of them, looking like grim reapers, swinging down their scythes from either side of him.

Vizaist ran mana through his leg and jumped back, but the two scythes gouged into his belly like cursed fangs, and fresh blood splashed into the air. He fell to the ground. He only stopped rolling once his body crashed into the tree behind him.

Vizaist slowly raised his head. The girl who had been moments from suffocating stood before him as if nothing had happened.

“I messed up. I’m getting too old for this,” said Vizaist.

“How did you like my acting? I’m pretty good if I say so myself,” said Noir.

“You used the dark element. So how are you fine?”

He put his hand on his stomach, but it wasn’t enough to stop the blood from flowing out. As he checked his wound, he also checked to see if he could still move his body.

The two ethereal bodies on either side of the girl had faded considerably, so much that they blended perfectly into the darkness and couldn’t be seen if one wasn’t right next to them.

“Why indeed? I don’t have such a loose tongue that I’d say anything important even if I knew the other person was about to die...like you,” responded Noir.

“That’s a shame,” answered Vizaist.

“But as thanks for entertaining me, I’ll cut your head clean off. And I’ll let it rest on the scythe too.” The girl’s cheeks turned red in what seemed like ecstasy.

With a sarcastic frown, Vizaist complained between his rough breaths. “There’s so many youngsters with a screw loose lately.”

“You have a large body, so I really only have to bring your head back. Now, goodbye.”

Noir dexterously swung her scythe through the ethereal bodies, which dissolved into the darkness. The scythe spun as if dancing and soon reached speeds that made it impossible to see. Mana that looked like purple flames floated about, and in the blink of an eye, she’d closed in on Vizaist and swung her great scythe.

However, before the blade could reach him, Vizaist unleashed a powerful blast of wind from both of his arms with no regard for his own survival. In an instant, a fierce wall of wind and a cloud of dust covered the surrounding area.

“Wh-What is this?!”

The girl swung her weapon anyways, but she felt no response. She peered at her scythe, which was lit up by the moonlight, and naturally there was no head on it either.

Only a few seconds passed, but they were critical. The moonlight had blinded her. She’d quickly used the sleeve of her robe to cover her eyes, but it was already too late.

Furrowing her brows, she gave up and spun around to leave. In the distance she could see the mansion’s guards finally running over.

She quickened her pace with no regard for their appearance. Her cheerful expression gave no indication of what she thought of the fools that couldn’t

even complete the task assigned to them.



His large frame was supported by the hands of two of his subordinates. Feeling that, Vizaist continued to push through the darkness. They were currently moving as fast as they could toward their base of operations.

When he took a break to catch his breath, Vizaist weakly glared at the two lending their shoulders.

“You’re ignoring orders,” he said.

“Whatever you say...but it was really cutting it close,” said one subordinate.

“It’d be cool to say we did it because we’re the ones who would have to face your angry daughter, but we’d pretty much given up on running away,” said the other. “And while we’d hidden to try to give our pursuers the slip, we sensed the aftermath of your wind magic.”

It must really have been a coincidence. When escaping proved difficult, there was an unspoken rule to destroy any devices that could be used to locate the rest and erase any trace of mana.

However, Vizaist had secretly used wind magic so that if there were any nearby allies, they would be able to discern his location. In the worst case, any lost subordinates could use that as a guide.

As a result, Vizaist had known that two of his subordinates were sneaking closer and used the last of his strength to struggle. He’d kicked up a cloud of dust against that frightening girl.

“It’s worth harsh punishment, but I honestly should thank you. We still can’t let our guard down, though. If things look bad, leave me behind.”

“Understood,” the two answered in unison. Seeing how they seemed to listen this time, Vizaist felt relieved, despite his expression twisting in pain from his stomach injury.

Earlier, he’d used the aftermath of the detection spell Air Map to launch a surprise attack, but if they had a pursuer that could use the earth attribute, they could track them using the same method. For the time being, they would

have to use their intuition and years of experience to flee while using up the last of their stamina and worrying about the darkness behind them.

A few hours later...

Vizaist and his loyal subordinates had safely made their return.

Either the troublesome girl was indifferent, or she was a rationalist who hated to waste time, but she had not pursued them.

They were lucky to have escaped with their lives.

Once they arrived at their hideout, Vizaist was rushed into the ICU. They had only given him basic first aid, and he'd lost so much blood that he needed blood transfusion immediately.

Of course, he couldn't be entrusted to normal military surgeons and had to be treated by trusted people, so it took some time to gather them. As such, proper healing from healing Magicmasters didn't begin until he was brought to the hospital in the city of Beliza in the middle layer.

Afterword

Hello, Izushiro here.

Compared with volume 15, this is in many ways a prelude to a return to the main plot of the web novel.

With an end being brought to the escaped prisoner arc in this volume, leaving many mysteries unanswered, we move on to the next story. I will leave it to the readers who have read the last volume to decide how you feel after reading it, but I do hope you can overlook the steadily increasing number of female characters as part of the fun.

And I'm not talking about Lilisha.

And now for my thanks to those involved in this book.

First I would like to thank my editor-in-chief for their prudent advice this time too, as well as to everyone involved in the sale, design, distribution, and marketing of this volume.

Thank you very much to Miyuki Ruria in charge of the illustrations for finding the time in your busy schedule. I only wish I had more space to talk about how cool the cover is!

Finally, my heartfelt thanks to all of the readers who picked up volume 16 of *The Greatest Magicmaster's Retirement Plan*.

Let us meet again in the next afterword.



**THE GREATEST
MAGICMASTER'S
RETIREMENT
PLAN**

16



“Good eye. **Cyclone Edge** is a pretty boring spell, but when you confine it to just your arms, it becomes easy to use.”

“That is **Cyclone Edge.**”



**“Of
course.
Finish it
already.”**

The girl removed her handcuffs, making no attempt to hide her exposed chest as she accepted the thin cloth from Morwald then put on a robe over it.

**“Shall
I kill
them?”**

Bonus Short Story

It's Okay Even If You Can't Do It

It was noon on an average day off. There were plenty of students in the Second Magical Institute's girls' dorm, even during weekends. Nobody went home for the weekend. And even if they wanted to go elsewhere, they could only go out into the city.

Since so many students were earnest, they didn't skip out on their training. If anything, on days without lectures, droves of students headed for the training grounds. However, Tesfia and Alice properly took the day off.

They took lessons during the day and trained with Alus afterwards. With this day off, they realized how long they'd been at it.

Naturally, they didn't forget about their mana control training. They'd wrapped it up early in the morning and were now leisurely spending time in their room.

"With the training over in the morning, are you going to do anything, Fia?" Alice, having changed into loungewear and sipping tea, asked.

Whenever they had nothing to do, they often asked each other about their plans.

"Hmm, uhm, what are you going to do?" Even after thinking, Tesfia was at a loss for a quick answer and asked Alice back.

"Since I have the time, I want to get through all of my laundry."

"I see. Hmm, maybe I should do some housework too..."

As a woman, maybe Tesfia could do some housework on her day off...but by the time she got off her backside, she'd find that Alice had already skillfully done it all. She looked over the room and found that Alice had cleaned every nook and cranny at some point.

They shared a room, but Alice handled everything quickly. So quickly, in fact, that she was done before Tesfia even noticed.

“I feel like you’re showing me our difference in quality as women,” said Tesfia.

“If that’s what you think, you could at least clean up the pajamas you throw all over the floor,” Alice said with an elegant smile, impeccably groomed from head to toe.

Tesfia cranked her neck and found that her scattered pajamas had been left neatly folded on top of her bed. Even the bed had been made.

While she wasn’t a bride-in-training, Tesfia wouldn’t even be able to call herself a woman at this rate.

“I’ll help too! I can’t let this slide,” she said.

Alice looked at Tesfia with a soft, pitying look. “After I just cleaned?”

“Why do you make it sound like I’ll make more of a mess?”

“Because I don’t want to clean twice over. How about tomorrow? You can just start tomorrow,” offered Alice. “Those who don’t act today won’t act tomorrow, Alice. Stop getting in the way of my growth. In fact, you should teach me!”

Tesfia huffed with determination and tied up her hair. Being motivated was fine, but that kind of motivation typically led to more work for Alice. Alice’s day off was at risk of being eaten up by cleaning up after Tesfia’s secondary disaster.

“Then how about I teach you how to make tea today? Although it would probably be better if you had one of your maids teach you. But since you’re so motivated, I’ll teach you what I know.”

In the kitchen, Alice would be able to clean up quickly.

“That’s true, I should learn to make it myself at some point.” Tesfia nodded. She was nobility and part of one of Alpha’s three great noble families at that. She’d never made her own tea.

“That said, you are the daughter of the Fable family, so can’t you leave all those things to the maids?” asked Alice.

“I can’t! Al’s going to give me a hard time every time something happens! Noble or not, I should at least be able to do basic housework.”

Alice nodded in understanding. Alus’s laboratory tended to be a mess, and even with Loki there, there was no end to the cleaning. It was a mess from one end of the room to the other. When she was training, Alice would often help Loki clean up.

Tesfia would try to help as well but would quickly be pushed away.

Now it depended on what level of skill Tesfia was after. Housewife skills weren’t gained overnight. Loki had likely learned what she knew through daily work, and Alice had had to live on her own, so she’d learned out of necessity. But she’d never felt that it was hard and actually rather liked it.

“Say, Fia, how much is a noble expected to do? Just so you know, Feli is an exception,” said Alice.

If Alice didn’t press the point, Tesfia would dream of becoming the best in the Institute within a day. But since she was showing so much enthusiasm, Alice figured she could start with what she could do and work from there.

It was hard to tell if Tesfia was being serious or not as she looked off into the distance and appeared to be thinking of something.

“I don’t know. I wouldn’t say that it’s absolutely necessary, but...it’s embarrassing not being able to do anything.”

Ah, so you thought it was embarrassing, Fia, thought Alice. It had become normal for Alice to look after Tesfia since they’d started living in the dorm together, and she was spoiling her in that sense.

Alice realized that she needed to reflect on the matter. “Ah! Then how about we look at how another noble girl does it? We can look at their room and use it as reference.”

“Hmm, well fine, but whose room are we going to look at?” Tesfia frowned dubiously while Alice smiled.

“Lilisha’s!”

“Huh?” Tesfia felt something foreboding, and her frown turned deeper.

“Don’t think you Lilisha would be perfect? You’re both nobles, and you’re both girls,” said Alice.

“Fine, but I don’t think she can do anything. That kind of lady is no good. She definitely thinks that nobles don’t do chores. At least I’m trying to acquire some housework skills! My growth as a woman—no, as a person—is remarkable!”

Tesfia one-sidedly concluded that Lilisha was no good and incapable of any housework, and due to their rivalry, that’s what she wished was true.

Anyone could do a bare minimum of housework. Tesfia told herself that and put on a bold front while Alice pushed her out of the room.

“Come on. Let’s just go. Also, this is our first time meeting Lilisha on a day off, so why not take a peek,” said Alice.

A short moment later, Lilisha answered the door, peeking through the gap. “What?”

It was a natural response to rude people who came over without any warning, but at least she was in her room.

“Hello, Lilisha. Could you show us your room? We wanted to see what the room of a noble looks like,” Alice said, purposefully not mentioning how slovenly Tesfia was.

But for some reason, Tesfia took it too far. “Come on, we won’t mind no matter how dirty it is. And we can bear it, even if it stinks.”

“This girl...” said Lilisha with a sigh. “It’s fine, but there’s nothing to see in my room. Also, don’t lump me in with you!”

Lilisha invited Alice and Tesfia in with unexpected ease. And like she’d said, her room really was barren. It had the bare amount of furniture and practically nothing in the way of personal belongings.

“Just take a seat wherever you like, and just so you know, I only have tea to serve.”

“Okaaay” the two answered in sync, waiting to see what kind of skills she had.

Lilisha headed for the kitchen and returned with tea before long—or rather, abnormally quickly. When Tesfia and Alice looked into the cup they both fell

silent. Lilisha had called it “tea,” but they felt it was distinctly different from the hot drink they’d imagined.

“Th-Thank you, Lilisha.” Alice took a sip...and found that it didn’t taste like anything.

Yeah, this is just water.

She glanced over at Tesfia who was dumbstruck for a moment before relief washed over her. It was a relief that this was what other noble ladies were like.

“Ahh, this calms me right down. This uselessness really lightens my heart,” said Tesfia.

It must have been like gourmet water for Tesfia to be able to drink it with such satisfaction. Alice wanted to say something about her low aspirations, but had more important things on her mind.

Are you sure you’re fine with this? Is this the kind of girliness you want...? she thought. Alice felt anguished, but she still made sure to finish what she was served.

Meanwhile, the air beside her was uneasy.

“What way of talking is that when someone went out of their way to serve you tea?! No wonder the head of the Fable family is so troubled,” said Lilisha.

“Why are you acting so high and mighty when all you did was serve water?” asked Tesfia.

“Huh? Sorry but I don’t have any tea to suit a stupid tongue.”

As the two began yet another argument, Alice stared at the bottom of her emptied cup. She could see what appeared to be remnants of tea leaves. So it hadn’t just been tap water.

“Jeez, you two are fine the way you are.” Alice felt like she’d never understand noble sensibilities. Rather, nothing really mattered anymore. “Lilisha, I’m helping myself to a refill. Also, that tea was only mostly water.”

Alice headed to the kitchen to make proper tea, but Lilisha stiffened up.

“Alice, give me some proper tea too,” Tesfia casually said.

But Lilisha shot right up and ran into the kitchen. “Sorry, Ms. Alice, but can you teach me how to make tea?”

“Hmm, well. You’re practically serving water, so okay.”

“Ah, wait up, Alice. Teach me first!” Tesfia shouted.

And so Alice taught the two of them how to make tea in Lilisha’s room. Unfortunately, the results weren’t worth the effort that Alice put in.

Both of them are supposed to be good at studying too...

As a result, Alice’s day off ended with her being exhausted.

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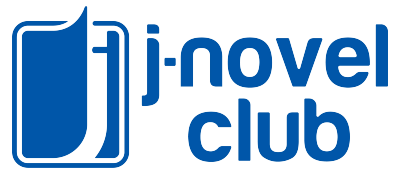
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The Greatest Magicmaster's Retirement Plan: Volume 16

by Izushiro

Translated by Warnis Edited by Heidi Ward

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